

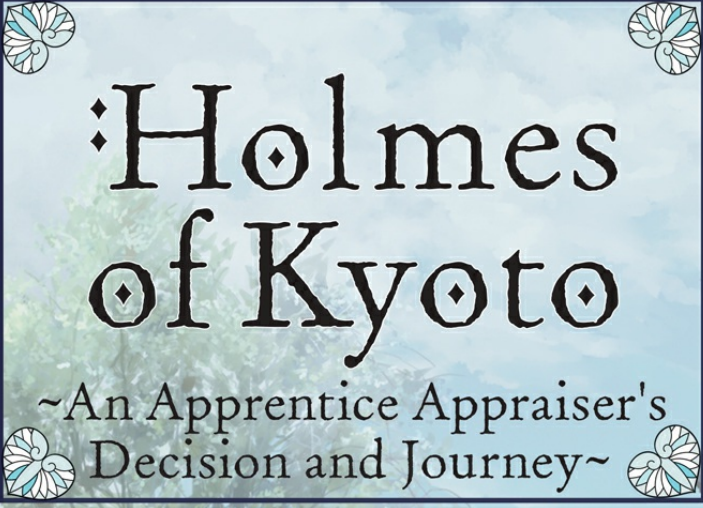
Holmes of Kyoto

~An Apprentice Appraiser's
Decision and Journey~

10

Mai Mochizuki





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Mai Mochizuki

Kiyotaka Yagashira

He is the grandson of the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.

Aoi Mashiro

She moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama in high school. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura and learning about art and antiques from Kiyotaka.



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Thank you for reading.

In the past, this series has presented temples, shrines, and other places using their real names, but in this volume, some of the transportation and facility names appearing from Chapter 2 onward have been slightly modified from their real-world models. This is because when we asked for official permission to publish the names, they requested to change the names slightly so that they would only be a model rather than a direct inclusion.

Also, due to story developments, this volume inevitably has to include stronger romantic elements than before. Please be aware of this in advance. Thank you for your understanding.

Prologue

It was April.

Last spring, Holmes had been working at a place called Shokado Garden Art Museum in Yawata City, Kyoto Prefecture, as part of his training. The garden was 1.5 times the size of Koshien Stadium and could be enjoyed all year round, but it was especially beautiful in spring when the cherry blossoms bloomed. In addition to the light pink variety, there were also deep pink weeping cherry trees. I thought back to the time when he—Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira—had been called “a beautiful young man with the grace of a weeping cherry tree” and smiled.

I, Aoi Mashiro, was leisurely walking around Shokado Garden by myself. I had come here with Holmes, but he wanted to discuss something with the assistant director, so I had decided to wander around the garden in the meantime.

“So pretty...” I stopped, awed by the beauty of the flowers. “I’m glad I got to come here. When I visited last year, it was past cherry blossom season.”

I had assumed that no matter how long Holmes’s discussion ran, I wouldn’t get bored here—and I was right. In the outer garden, which had around forty types of bamboo, there were three tearooms called Sho-in, Bai-in, and Chiku-in, as well as a stone washbasin and the historic Ominaeshi Tomb. The camellias really made it feel like early spring.

Beautifully arranged flowers, bamboo, trees, and ponds. The Kyoto Botanical Gardens near my university were nice too, but this place was overflowing with charm.

I wonder what Holmes’s discussion is about? People often come to him for advice, but it’s unusual for him to ask someone for advice himself.

“Aoi!” came a voice from behind me.

I turned and saw Holmes jogging towards me. Behind him was Assistant Director Igawa, and I bowed to him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Holmes. “You could have joined us...”

“It’s okay. I was admiring the garden.”

Since we came all this way, I want to take my time exploring the garden. I’m sure he can understand that feeling.

“The garden is nice in spring, isn’t it?” he said with a grin.

Igawa, who had slowly walked up to us, raised a hand and said, “Hey there, Aoi. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has.”

“The last time we met was when Kiyotaka was working here, so I guess it’s been about a year.”

“Yes, although I secretly came here in the fall as well.”

“You did? Thank you. You should’ve asked for me,” he said happily. “Oh, right.” He turned to Holmes. “How far along are you in your training, Kiyotaka?”

“I’m already on the final stretch.”

“Really?! Didn’t you say it was going to take around two years?”

“I’m trying to finish as soon as possible.”

“I’m impressed. So, where are you working now?”

“Daimaru’s Kyoto store.”

“That department store?! What are you doing there?”

“I’m helping with a project in the sales promotion department.”

“Huh, that seems like a good fit. We’d love it if you came to work for us again.”

“I’m honored to hear that.”

“We were able to make new connections through the Seiji Yagashira exhibition. Oh, and Yoneyama has become famous in the industry in such a short time.”

Ryosuke Yoneyama, who had visited the exhibit, was someone we knew well. He was a former counterfeiter who had reformed after being exposed by the

nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira, Holmes's grandfather and the owner of Kura. After finding a girlfriend, he had wanted to become a man worthy of her, so he'd gone abroad to study painting and won a major contest there. Using that achievement as a stepping-stone, he had gone on to win several awards and was now a famous painter, both in Japan and overseas. As it happened, his girlfriend was Saori Miyashita, my best friend Kaori's older sister.

"Indeed," said Holmes. "I heard he had a successful solo exhibition in Roppongi."

I had also heard about it from Kaori. Yoneyama had held a solo exhibition for ink wash paintings—his specialty. Apparently, when the topic of an exhibit in Tokyo had come up, he had insisted on holding the show in Roppongi because that was where Miyashita Kimono Fabrics had once expanded their business to. Unfortunately, the store had lost so much money that they'd had to pull out of Tokyo and business was poor for a while. Knowing that, Yoneyama had purposely chosen Roppongi so that he could get revenge for them. His exhibition turned out to be a great success, and he happily proclaimed, "I've avenged Miyashita Kimono Fabrics."

I'm not sure if Yoneyama having a successful exhibition in Roppongi counts as Miyashita Kimono Fabrics getting revenge...

There was a reason Yoneyama was working so hard. It was because he was serious about marrying Saori. Since he was a talented painter who was willing to be taken into the Miyashita family and inherit the store, Saori's parents had initially been enthusiastic about their relationship. However, their minds changed after learning that he was a former counterfeiter who had been on a suspended sentence. Yoneyama was trying his best in many ways to overwrite his past deeds and win their approval. His success in Roppongi surely would've improved their impression of him.

"Yes, the exhibition was a success, but it's a shame that he ran into trouble."

"Huh?" Holmes tilted his head. "What trouble?"

"Oh, you didn't know? Since you're so well-versed in the art world, I thought you'd know everything."

"I'm not accompanying my grandfather these days, so that kind of news

hasn't been reaching me," Holmes said in a mildly bitter tone.

Holmes's position as the owner's attendant had been taken over by Yoshie Takiyama, the owner's girlfriend. Sometimes her son, Rikyu, accompanied them for learning purposes. On a side note, Rikyu had successfully passed the exam for the Kyoto Institute of Technology, his first choice of university.

"Some of Yoneyama's works were stolen," the assistant director said with a grim face.

"What?!" Holmes and I both blinked in surprise.

"I haven't seen anything like that in the news," said Holmes.

"Yeah. It seems they don't want to draw too much attention to the matter, so I think only the people involved know. They did report it to the police, of course."

"I see," Holmes muttered, stroking his chin.

As I listened to their conversation, I found myself increasingly curious, so I asked, "Which paintings were stolen?"

"I don't know, but he said he'd been holding on to them because he wanted to submit them to overseas contests. He must be especially distraught over the theft because he had that emotional attachment to them."

My heart pounded. *What kind of paintings are they?*

Yoneyama had shown Holmes and me one of his ink wash paintings before. It was a gray scale piece titled *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler*. It didn't use any color, yet looking at it made you envision a light pink hue. I was fascinated by the perceived color, and the captivating beauty of the weeping cherry blossoms left a deep impression, as did the adorable bush warbler lovingly looking up at them. The painting had rendered me speechless, and before I knew it, I had tears in my eyes.

Holmes murmured a passionate, "This is incredible."

"It's a painting of you two," Yoneyama happily responded.

"Huh?" We blinked in surprise.

“People were calling Kiyotaka ‘a beautiful young man with the grace of a weeping cherry tree,’ weren’t they? Ink-painted weeping cherry trees really do feel like him. They’re elusive and people imagine different colors when they see them. So, this weeping cherry tree is Kiyotaka and the cute little bush warbler is Aoi,” he explained with a mischievous grin.

Holmes and I looked at each other and chuckled.

“I’m honored to be likened to such a wonderful piece of art,” Holmes said.

“Me too,” I added. “This adorable bird is me? I feel like other people will get offended.”

“It has your round and cute eyes, but you’re much lovelier,” Holmes said smoothly, making my heart skip a beat. It felt more like something a Parisian would say than a Kyoto guy.

“Yeah, yeah,” Yoneyama said with a shrug.

“Am I really such an elusive person?” Holmes wondered. “I consider myself fairly easy to understand.” He gazed at the painting for a while before slowly lowering his eyes and placing a hand on his chest. “I sincerely think it’s a masterpiece that will last for generations.”

Yoneyama scratched his head, looking both happy and embarrassed. “Did you like it?”

Holmes nodded. “Yes, very much. Even if it wasn’t modeled after us, I’d want to look at it all day long.”

I could tell that his praise was genuine. After all, I felt the same way. Every time I set eyes on the monochrome painting, vivid colors came to mind. It was a wonderful work of art that made you want to admire it forever.

“I like it too, so I was planning on keeping it,” said Yoneyama. “But I wouldn’t mind letting you have it, Kiyotaka. What do you think?”

Holmes froze for a second.

What will he say? I wondered, looking up at him.

He smiled gently and responded, “I appreciate the offer.”

“Great,” Yoneyama said with a grin.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You said before that when you’re truly fascinated by something, you might buy it for the store, but you’ll never buy it for yourself. That means you really do like this painting.”

“Did I ever say that to you?” Holmes averted his eyes, seeming ashamed.

“Now that you mention it...” I nodded. I’d known Holmes for a long time, but I’d never seen him buy any works of art for himself.

Wait, no, there was one time he bought a coffee cup at Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple’s handicraft market. But thinking back on it, I doubt he liked it to the point of “fascination.”

“You did say it,” Yoneyama insisted. “It left an impression on me. I thought, ‘Is this what a real merchant is like?’ You know, like how drug dealers never get addicted themselves.”

That’s a perfect comparison, I thought, my face stiffening.

Holmes’s expression relaxed. He must’ve been thinking the same thing. “Yes, that’s right. I’m a merchant through and through. I truly love this wonderful painting that you’ve likened to us, and that’s precisely why I won’t try to obtain it for myself. I *would* like to make it one of Kura’s featured pieces, though,” he said with a grin.

Perhaps due to that conversation, *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler* was special to me. I couldn’t bear the thought of it being stolen—and that was from the perspective of someone who merely admired the work. It must’ve been even more distressing for Yoneyama himself.

“It’s deplorable that such a thing could happen,” Holmes said, crossing his arms and sighing.

“It really is,” Igawa agreed. “We were talking about how we have to be careful too.”

“How were they stolen?”

“I heard the thief mixed in with the delivery workers after the exhibition ended.”

Holmes furrowed his brows.

“Is something wrong?” Igawa asked.

“Oh, no. We really do need to be careful. Excuse me,” Holmes said, taking his phone out of his pocket and looking at the screen. He’d received a message. He grimaced and said, “Speak of the devil.”

“Huh?”

“It appears Yoneyama is visiting a detective agency right now. I know the guy there, and he’s asking me to come in...”

“Are you talking about Komatsu?” I asked.

Katsuya Komatsu was a detective in his mid-forties who we had met through a certain incident. He didn’t seem very reliable at first glance, but he used to be a hacker on a world-class cyber team.

“You should go,” Igawa said, giving Holmes a light tap on the shoulder.

“Thank you for sparing time for me today.”

“No, it was a pleasure. Oh, and as for your plan, I’ll help you in any way I can. Good luck!”

Holmes thanked him again and bowed.

What did he discuss with Igawa? I wondered, but before I could ask, Holmes hurriedly took my hand and said, “Let’s go, Aoi.”

*

South of the Kiyamachi-Shijo intersection was a charming street along the Takase River, lined with traditional townhouses and historic restaurants. Petals were falling from the riverside cherry blossom trees.

Holmes and I stopped in front of a townhouse that had a wooden sign saying “Komatsu Detective Agency.” Komatsu used to work out of an apartment in Gojo, but after getting back together with his ex-wife, she and their daughter had come to live with him, so he’d moved his office here.

“This is pretty elegant for a detective agency, huh?” I remarked.

It was my first time visiting, and I looked up at the building in wonder. It was probably rare for a detective agency to be in a traditional townhouse. I had heard that a small quirk of fate had led Komatsu to choose this place in Kiyamachi for his new office.

“The landlord was one of his former clients, right?” I asked.

“Yes. The elderly couple who lived here asked him to find their disowned son. He successfully located him and now the couple is living with their son’s family.”

It happened to be right when Komatsu was set to remarry and had been looking for a new office. When he’d mentioned it, the elderly couple had said, “We’d rather let you use this townhouse than rent it to a stranger.”

“What a nice story,” I said after Holmes had recounted the series of events.

“It’s not all good, though.” He opened the sliding door.

“Huh?”

“The rent is expensive. This area has high property taxes, so that’s not surprising. Komatsu said that after happily accepting the offer, he realized he screwed up.”

It’s a tough world out there.

As an aside, I’d heard that Komatsu had also asked Holmes to train under him. If that had happened, he really would have become “Detective Holmes of Kyoto.” I couldn’t help but smile at the thought.

“Excuse us,” we said, stepping inside. We were greeted by a sofa set on a wooden floor rather than a Japanese-style tatami room.

“It’s a Western-style interior?” I remarked. “That’s unexpected.”

“It was originally tatami, but he got the landlord’s permission to renovate,” Holmes explained. “The first-floor living room is the reception room, and the second floor is the research room equipped with the latest in computer technology.” He took out a pair of slippers for me. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

I set my shoes aside, put on the slippers, and followed Holmes into the refashioned living room, where there were two three-person sofas facing each other. Komatsu the private detective and Yoneyama were sitting there.

Komatsu looked at us and raised a hand. “Hey there, kiddos.” As usual, he spoke bluntly and his face was unshaven. He seemed scary at first glance, but he was actually a nice person, albeit socially awkward. He stared at the laptop resting on his knees with a serious look on his face.

“Long time no see,” I greeted him with a smile.

Across from him was Yoneyama, who said, “Thanks for coming.” He smiled but his expression was that of a man who had given up on everything. His slightly long hair was tied back in a ponytail, and he had the delicate air of an artist.

“Yoneyama...” I didn’t know what to say to him.

“Have a seat, Aoi,” he said, shifting to one end of the sofa. I sat on the other end, and Holmes sat next to Komatsu.

“Congratulations on the success of your solo exhibition in Roppongi,” Holmes said. “But...I’m sorry about what happened.” He had a gentle look on his face.

“Yeah, I was really attached to those pieces.” Yoneyama shrugged and chuckled weakly. His way of laughing hadn’t changed. “It doesn’t seem like the police were able to trace their whereabouts. I came here because I remembered Aoi’s eighteenth birthday party, when Kiyotaka introduced Komatsu as a ‘brilliant detective.’”

“I ain’t that,” Komatsu said, scratching his head awkwardly.

“Yes, you are,” Holmes insisted. “Did you find out anything yet?” He craned his neck to peek at the detective’s laptop.

“Yeah, I looked into the foreign auction site you sent me earlier.” He tapped away at the keyboard and stopped. “And I found out they were put up for auction in the UK.” He placed the laptop on the table between the sofas and turned it so that we could see the screen. Yoneyama’s ink wash paintings were among the list of items.

I leaned forward to look at the pictures. Two pieces had been stolen. One of them was a hanging scroll—*Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler*. My fear had come true. I gritted my teeth, feeling bitter, but I knew that Yoneyama was suffering even more. I looked back at the screen, wondering what the other piece was. This one was also a hanging scroll, but it was one that I hadn't seen before.

"Is that a mouse and a princess?" I asked.

In the painting, water droplets accumulated on the floor, forming a mouse. The mouse was looking up at a princess wearing a twelve-layered kimono and holding a fan, surrounded by a snowy landscape. Meanwhile, the princess was looking up at a bird perched on a tree branch.

"Yes, the painting is called *Mouse*," Yoneyama replied.

Holmes stood up and came behind us to look at the screen. "Is this Sesshu's mouse, by any chance?"

"I'm impressed you figured it out."

"It's quite obvious."

I nodded. "Oh, I get it."

"Sesshu's mouse?" Komatsu tilted his head.

"Sesshu was an artist-monk from the Muromachi period," Holmes replied immediately.

"A what now?" Komatsu's head tilted further.

"Painting was part of a monk's training back then, and those who focused on painting like Sesshu did were called artist-monks."

"Huh."

"Sesshu was taught how to paint by Shubun of Shokoku-ji Temple. In 1467, he went to Ming China to study ink wash painting in its place of origin. He then developed his own style, different from the Ming techniques, and painted many noteworthy pieces during his lifetime. One of his most famous works is *Landscapes of Autumn and Winter*, which is a designated national treasure in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum..." Holmes took out his phone as

he explained and showed Komatsu a picture of *Landscapes of Autumn and Winter*, a two-piece set of ink-painted scrolls. Autumn was on the right and winter was on the left. It portrayed rocks and mountains in a counterclockwise spiral beginning at the lower left, and its bold outlines and vigorous brushstrokes left a deep impression.

“Oh, I feel like I’ve seen this before,” Komatsu said without much confidence.

“Also, another one of his national treasures, *View of Amanohashidate*, is here in Kyoto National Museum, as is the important cultural property, *Portrait of Huang Chuping*.”

“So, does he have a famous mouse painting too?”

“No, it’s from an anecdote.”

“Huh?”

“When Sesshu was a child, he trained at Hofuku-ji Temple in Okayama Prefecture. He already loved painting at the time, and he was always drawing when the head priest wasn’t looking. The head priest got angry with him and tied him to a pillar in the main building as punishment.”

“That wouldn’t go over well these days,” Komatsu said dryly.

“Yeah,” I agreed, placing a hand over my mouth.

“In the evening, when the head priest went to check on Sesshu, he found a large mouse at his feet. Startled, he tried to shoo it away, but the mouse didn’t budge. Upon closer inspection, he realized it was a painting on the floor that Sesshu had drawn with his toes using his own tears. The head priest was so impressed that he allowed Sesshu to keep painting, or so the story goes.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” Komatsu said eagerly.

“Yes, it’s a well-known folk tale.”

That’s right; it’s a pretty famous anecdote even if people don’t remember that it’s about Sesshu.

“Oh, so Yoneyama painted this based on that story,” Komatsu said, clapping his hands together.

“Yes.” Yoneyama smiled gently. “Sesshu is my idol.”

“And the woman the mouse is gazing at is the Saio,” Holmes added.

I looked at the screen again. Now that he mentioned it, the princess *was* the Saio—an unmarried imperial princess chosen to serve as a shrine maiden. Her silhouette reminded me of Yoneyama’s girlfriend, Saori, who had been the Saio-dai at the Aoi Festival three years ago.

Yoneyama’s face turned bright red.

“And the bird the Saio is looking up at—could it be an osprey?”

“Osprey?” I looked at Holmes, confused by the unfamiliar word.

“It can be seen in winter in western Japan and has been known since ancient times as a hawk that hunts fish. One of the ways of writing its name is with the characters for ‘boat’ and ‘bird,’ and since this painting is of a snowy landscape, you can make the connection to ‘snow boat,’ which is how Sesshu’s name is written. A small mouse bound to a temple admires the beautiful Saio and eventually becomes a large hawk that flies around the vast world with her. You poured your wish into this piece, didn’t you?” Holmes said, peering at the laptop.

The painter shed tears.

“Yoneyama...” I timidly offered him my handkerchief.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was happy that Kiyotaka understood the feelings I put into it, and then I was just so sad and frustrated that it was stolen.” He pressed the handkerchief to his eyes.

“What happened with this auction? Isn’t it weird that stolen items are being auctioned off in the first place?” I raised my voice without thinking.

Komatsu grimaced. “It looks like Yoneyama’s case was investigated by the Kyoto police as a theft, but it wasn’t registered in the overseas stolen art database. So the company held the auction without knowing the works were stolen, and they’ve already been sold.”

“Oh no! But can’t you get them returned since they were stolen?”

The detective frowned. “That’s the hard part. There’s a system called

‘immediate acquisition.’”

“What’s that?”

Holmes was the one to answer my question. “Article 192 of the Japanese Civil Code states, ‘A person who commences the possession of movables peacefully and openly by a transactional act acquires rights to exercise with respect to such movables immediately if he or she is in good faith and faultless.’ This is called immediate acquisition, or acquisition in good faith. In other words, this system says that the third party who unknowingly acquired a stolen item should be protected over the victim of the theft.”

I furrowed my brow, not quite able to understand.

“For example, let’s say Person A borrows a jewel from Person B and sells it to Person C without permission. Person C doesn’t know that it was stolen. When the incident becomes public and you ask, ‘Who does the jewel belong to now?’, the answer is Person C, who bought it from Person A without knowing.”

“What?” I squeaked. “That’s messed up.”

“Indeed. The system protects the deceived, or rather, those who unknowingly paid money for stolen goods. If someone could appear later and say, ‘I’m the true owner, so give that back,’ then no one would be able to buy things safely. In other words, no one would do business anymore and the economy would stagnate. That’s the thought process behind it.”

“But...” I still couldn’t accept it.

“However, there is still hope,” he continued. “Blatant crimes like art theft are an exception to the immediate acquisition rule.”

“Right, it’s a crime, after all.” I nodded firmly.

“Yes. According to Article 193, if the property is lost or stolen goods, you can demand its return as long as it’s within two years of the time it was lost. However, Article 194 states that if the current possessor purchased it in good faith at an auction, public market, or from a merchant selling similar goods, then you can’t have it returned unless you compensate the person for the price they paid, since there’s a greater need to protect transaction security.”

“So basically, Yoneyama can request the return if it’s within two years, but he has to reimburse what the winning bidder paid?”

“That’s correct.” Holmes nodded, looking similarly displeased.

Yoneyama lowered his eyes, not saying anything.

“But once two years have passed, he has no hope of getting them back,” Holmes added.

“How much did they go for?” I asked.

“Thirty-three thousand pounds, apparently,” answered Komatsu.

“Huh?” *How much is that?*

“I’d estimate roughly five million yen,” replied Holmes.

“Five million yen?” Yoneyama and I repeated.

“Anyway, we’ll just have to make an inquiry,” said Komatsu. “You’re good at English, right, kiddo? Can you help me contact this company? I’ll pay you, of course.”

“All right.”

“I fiddled around a bit and it looks like the buyer is a rich guy from China named Zhifei Jing. He probably liked the paintings, so it’s gonna take a lot of effort to get them back.”

“Let’s hire a lawyer. I know someone good.”

As Komatsu and Holmes were talking, Yoneyama clenched his fists and said, “No, I think I’ll stop here.” He put on a relaxed smile.

“This isn’t okay, Yoneyama,” insisted Holmes.

“No, it’s fine. I’m a little touched that someone was willing to pay five million for my paintings, even if I’m not going to see that money.”

“Are you seriously saying this?” Holmes crossed his arms and stared at the artist.

“I am. I don’t want to spend money to get the paintings back. If anything, this is retribution.”

“Retribution?” Komatsu looked at Yoneyama, confused.

“I used to be a counterfeiter. I worked in my studio making forgeries as I was told. They were believable enough to be sold at auctions, and people paid money for them. After turning myself in, I thought I’d atoned for my crimes, but I guess it wasn’t enough. It’s only natural that something like this would happen to me. But...”

“But?” I asked in a soft voice.

“I was especially attached to *Mouse*, so it really hurts to lose it. If it were any other painting, I could give up on it. But that’s not how retribution works, is it?” he murmured tearfully.

“You did commit crimes, but you repented, took responsibility, and made amends in your own way, didn’t you?” Holmes replied, frowning. “I don’t think it’s right to overlook a crime that happened to you just because you committed other crimes in the past.”

“No, it’s okay.” Yoneyama shook his head. “Like I said, I’m happy someone paid five million for them.”

“Well, *I’m* disappointed.”

“Huh?”

“I find it unfortunate that you think those amazing paintings are only worth five million.”

I could tell that Holmes truly meant what he said, but Yoneyama seemed to take it as flattery.

“Thanks, Kiyotaka,” he said, smiling through his tears. “I’ll be leaving now. Oh, Komatsu, please email me the investigation fee and where to send the payment.”

“No need to pay me; I didn’t do much,” the detective said bluntly, scratching his head.

“Thank you.” Yoneyama stood up. Holmes and I accompanied him to the front door. When he opened the sliding door, it was pouring outside. “It’s raining,” he remarked.

But it was so sunny when we arrived. I frowned. “It’s windy too. It’ll be so sad if the cherry blossoms get blown away,” I lamented.

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded.

“I feel like it rains a lot during cherry blossom season...”

“It’s as if the rain is jealous of the cherry blossoms,” Yoneyama murmured, looking up at the gray sky.

“Jealous?” Holmes repeated.

“Yes. To me, it seems like the rain is jealous of their beauty and is trying to scatter their petals faster. People are like that too. When someone’s trying to become happy, someone else will show up to drag them down.” The painter laughed self-deprecatingly. “I was hoping to win a major overseas competition and gain enough prestige to make up for all of my past disgraces. Ideally with that painting...”

Yoneyama probably wanted to formally propose to Saori after winning a prestigious title. He could still try with other paintings, but the one that depicted his past self, the woman he admired, and his future ambition was surely special. I wasn’t an artist, so I couldn’t estimate how shocking it had been for him. Not knowing what to say, I cast my eyes down.

“I think I’ll run to the subway station. See you, and thanks.” He took an umbrella with an apologetic expression.

As he was heading out the door, Holmes called out to him.

He turned around. “Yes?”

“As someone involved in the art world, I’d like to prevent things like this from happening again. I know you’ve withdrawn your request, but could I proceed with the investigation on my own?”

Yoneyama stared blankly at Holmes before chuckling and saying, “You don’t need my permission if you’re doing it on your own, do you? Go ahead.” He gave a resigned smile and left.

As I watched him run off, I quietly asked, “Do you mean there might be other thefts going on?”

“I’m sure there are. What’s worrying is that pretending to be a delivery worker and stealing things after an exhibition is what a professional criminal would do.”

“Professional...”

“There was someone who used a similar technique before, wasn’t there?”

“Huh?” I tilted my head. Then, I remembered. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

“‘Someone else will show up to drag them down.’ Well said, Yoneyama,” Holmes muttered quietly as he stared at the cherry trees, their branches swaying in the wind and rain.

Chapter 1: Kyoto's Kukai Pilgrimage and Rengetsu's Thoughts

1

"Are you and Holmes really going on a trip next month?" Kaori asked, taking a bite of her omelet made with Tanba black soybeans.

We were on the first floor of Kyoto Prefectural University's Inamori Hall, where there was a cafe-style lunchroom. It was fancy enough that you wouldn't think it was a school cafeteria, and fortunately, the prices were extremely reasonable. Kaori and I occasionally had lunch there.

Her sudden question made me choke and cover my mouth. "Um, yes?" I replied, taking a questioning tone for some reason. My cheeks felt unbearably hot.

"Where did you decide to go in the end?"

"He said it'll be a surprise until the day of."

I had ordered the pasta of the day. The tomato sauce with Kamo eggplant tasted really good. I twirled my fork on top of my spoon, too embarrassed to look up from my plate. Before I knew it, the clump of pasta had grown to oversized proportions.

"You're keeping it a secret from your parents?" she asked in a curious whisper.

"No."

"Huh? You told them?" She leaned forward in disbelief.

"Holmes said he didn't want to be in a relationship where we have to lie to my parents, and that if they objected to the trip, he'd give up on it."

"Wait, what? It almost sounds like he's a really good person." Kaori frowned.

I shrugged. “He actually *is* a good person, you know?”

“So, what did your parents say?”

“My mom said, ‘You’re a grown woman, so if you want to go, then go.’ She didn’t want him to ask for permission either, since it’d be awkward.”

“Well, yeah. Did you tell your dad too?”

“Not directly, but my mom did. He had mixed feelings about it, but he does approve of my relationship with Holmes, and my mom was totally fine with it, so yeah.”

“Makes sense. Holmes spent a long time clearing out the obstacles in his way, huh?”

“You’re exaggerating,” I said with a laugh.

“It just goes to show how much he likes you. Even I’ll give him credit for that. He’s crazy about you to the point where his cool facade falls apart.”

Feeling my cheeks heat up again, I looked down.

“Oh, right, where’s he training now?” she asked.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you? He’s at Daimaru.”

Kaori choked. “Holmes? At Daimaru? If someone like him was at the underground sweets section, the line would snake around the entire store.”

Everyone in Kyoto was familiar with the department store, so there was no need for further explanation. Her words made me imagine Holmes in a white shirt and black apron, serving sweets. The sight would indeed attract many customers.

“No, it’s not a front-facing role,” I clarified. “He’s in something called the sales promotion department.”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, of course there’s more to department stores than just in-store sales.”

“In-store sales are what you first think of. Now that I’m at university, I want to buy makeup, but the makeup sections in department stores are so dazzling that I feel awkward there.”

"I know the feeling. I go there a lot with my mom, though, and they really have everything. If I was going to buy makeup, I'd want to go to a proper place like that and ask for advice."

"Yeah. Maybe I'll give it a try."

"You can get them to teach you how to apply makeup before your trip."

"Yeah..."

"So, why is Holmes at Daimaru?"

"Apparently the owner knows Daimaru's manager."

Kaori immediately looked convinced. Then she asked in a concerned tone, "But even if he's in the sales promotion department, he won't be able to take Golden Week off at a place like that, will he?"

"Umm, he requested Golden Week off at the very beginning, and it was approved."

"That's Holmes for you."

I completely agreed. "He was happy, saying that working at Daimaru would be a good experience."

"Where's he staying now, then?"

"He's just living with the manager at their apartment in Yasaka. They're keeping it a secret from the owner."

"Oh, that must be a load off of the manager's shoulders," Kaori said, relieved.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You seem concerned about the manager."

"Th-That's not true!"

I was a little surprised by her strong denial.

"Oh, um, what I meant was...right, I think he reminds me of my uncle."

"Your uncle?"

"My dad's younger brother lives in the UK, and he's like a real English gentleman, all calm and relaxed. He comes back once every few years and brings amazing souvenirs for my sister and me, and I really miss him when he's

gone.”

I could tell that she truly adored him. She must’ve been seeing her uncle in the manager.

“Now that you mention it, Holmes and the manager do have an English gentleman feel to them.”

“Yeah, the Yagashira father and son are like that.”

“Not the owner, though.”

“Nope.”

We giggled at the thought of the owner.

“Oh yeah, have you been going on dates with Holmes lately?” Kaori asked, swiftly changing the subject.

“Not recently, but we’re going to meet up this Saturday. He said he wanted to visit some temples before the trip.”

“Temples, huh?” she murmured with a slightly listless tone.

2

Kiyotaka left the apartment in Yasaka a little after 8 a.m., and instead of taking the bus, he walked west on the south side of Shijo Street. Gion was usually bustling with activity, but it was nice and quiet at this time of day. As he crossed the large Shijo Bridge, he looked out over the Kamo River and saw a gathering of herons.

They look like they’re having a morning meeting. He smiled at himself for having such a cute thought.

After passing Kawaramachi Street and the familiar Teramachi Street, he reached Takakura Street and stopped at Daimaru’s Kyoto store, which was on the north side of Shijo Street. Above the “DAIMARU” logo was a majestic bronze statue of a peacock. This department store had begun from a textile store called Daimonji-ya, which had been opened in Kyoto by Hikoemon Shimomura in 1717. Since it had such a long history, the people of Kyoto were

very familiar with it.

The store wasn't open for the day yet. After looking up at it, Kiyotaka turned around and entered the building opposite it. The sales promotion department's office wasn't inside the store; it was on the second floor of a building on the south side of Shijo Street. Upon opening the door, he was greeted with a large space crammed full of steel desks, with labels reading "Advertising," "Retail Strategy," "Store Design," and "Customer Strategy" hanging from the ceiling. It looked chaotic, but all corporate offices were probably like this. Also, since it was still early, there was barely anyone around.

The sales promotion department's project manager's desk was near the window, bathed in the bright spring sunlight.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka," Kyoka Taniguchi greeted him with a cheerful smile. She was one of his temporary coworkers, a slim woman in her early thirties with large, bright eyes.

Next to her was another coworker, a man in his late thirties named Kazuo Nakahara. "Morning, Kiyotaka," he said with a gentle smile.

Taniguchi and Nakahara were the two members of the project team. Kiyotaka was joining them for a limited period of time. They called him by his first name because Daimaru Kyoto's manager, who was acquainted with the owner, called him that.

"Good morning," Kiyotaka replied. "You're both here early today."

The typical work hours were from 9:45 a.m. to 6:15 p.m., but they were flexible. As a temporary trainee, Kiyotaka always made a point of arriving early.

"You're always early, so we were curious about what time you came in," Taniguchi explained. "We showed up early to find out."

"It's about an hour early, huh?" Nakahara added.

The clock indicated that it was 8:35 a.m.

"Yes, it's usually around that much," Kiyotaka replied, putting his things down. He noticed there wasn't any coffee on their desks and asked, "Shall I make coffee?"

“Oh, you don’t have to,” said Taniguchi.

“Yeah,” agreed Nakahara.

“It’s fine,” Kiyotaka said with a smile. “I’ll make yours alongside mine.” He headed towards the kitchenette.

“Oh, in that case, bring the coffee to the meeting room,” said Taniguchi. “Since we’re all here early, let’s have a meeting while it’s still quiet. I’ll get everything ready.”

Kiyotaka turned around and said, “Understood.”

“I was concerned when I heard our department was going to have to take care of a young man from a prestigious family, but he’s a good worker,” Nakahara muttered, picking up the documents.

Taniguchi clenched her fist. “Seriously. Rather than having to take care of him, it’s more like I’ve been blessed with eye candy.”

“He’s good looking, so he’d be suited to out-of-store sales too.”

“No way. If he went out to do sales, it definitely wouldn’t end well. Some woman would catch him and not let him go home.”

“It sounds convincing from you, since you used to do out-of-store sales. I feel like he’d bring in an incredible amount of revenue, though.”

“Yeah,” Taniguchi said, laughing as they went to the meeting room.

The room was less of a conference room and more of a simple meeting space with a table and chairs. By the time Kiyotaka arrived with the coffee, Nakahara and Taniguchi were already seated with their laptops open and the materials spread out on the table. They had brought over Kiyotaka’s bag and materials as well.

“Thank you,” Kiyotaka said, taking a seat.

The first page of the document was titled “ACKP Proposal.” Daimaru Kyoto had started up a project with the concept of giving the department store a more traditional Kyoto flair. “ACKP” was an abbreviation of “Ancient City Kyoto Project.”

“ACKP is only a short-term project, though,” said Nakahara. “Because of the concept, it’s reassuring to have a Kyoto expert like you here.”

“Yes, your presence is a real lifesaver,” Taniguchi added. “We didn’t think we’d be able to handle it with just the two of us.”

Kiyotaka held up a hand in a reserved manner and said, “I’m no such thing. I just hope I won’t be a burden on you.”

“By the way, you majored in philology and literature at Kyoto University, didn’t you?” asked Nakahara.

“Yes.”

“What was your thesis topic?”

“The culture of the ancient city Kyoto and the influence it had on the world,” Kiyotaka answered smoothly.

Taniguchi laughed without thinking. “Sorry, it was just too fitting. That’s a nice topic, though. An exhibition with that theme sounds like a good idea.”

“It matches the name of the project,” Nakahara said, nodding.

Kiyotaka tilted his head with a frown. “I’m not sure if the general public would find it interesting, though.”

“That’s a good point,” said Taniguchi. “If I saw an ad for that exhibition, I don’t think I’d want to go.” She sighed and rested her chin on her hand.

“You came up with an idea too, right, Kiyotaka?” asked Nakahara.

“Yes, although it’s nothing special.” He took a document out of his bag. “This is a picture of a tourist visiting Kyoto.” The paper showed a young woman wearing a rental kimono, looking happy. “There are many people who want to walk around Kyoto in a kimono, so how about offering a high-quality kimono rental program aimed at tourists?” he suggested, looking down at the document on the table.

Taniguchi nodded. “There’s been a surge in people sightseeing in kimono, so that might work. It would get a lot of people coming into the store.”

“But it’ll inevitably cost more than other places. Would people still come?”

Nakamura mused, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

“I think they will,” said Kiyotaka. “There are a certain number of people in the world who are willing to pay more for quality. It’s very obvious when a kimono is of high quality, and I’m sure there will be people who think, ‘If I’m going to the effort of walking around Kyoto in a kimono, I might as well order one from Daimaru Kyoto.’”

“It’s exactly the kind of thing a department store would have, huh?” remarked Nakamura.

“Yes,” agreed Taniguchi. “It’ll be difficult to put into practice right away, but it’s not a bad idea.” She nodded, typed the suggestion down on her laptop, and looked up. “My idea is a tour of Takio Shrine and Kaiho-ji Temple: places related to Daimaru Kyoto. I think it might be interesting.”

It was said that back when Daimaru’s founder, Hikoemon Shimomura, was a peddler, he always visited Takio Shrine when traveling between his hometown (which was now Kyomachi in Fushimi-ku) and Kyoto. He later made large donations to the shrine, attributing Daimaru’s prosperity to its blessing.

As for Kaiho-ji Temple, it was said that Hikoemon Shimomura was enshrined there because he’d been converted by a Zen priest named Jikuan and continued to support the temple with his own donations.

“Oh, that sounds fun,” said Kiyotaka. “It’ll be a good blessing for the business too.”

“That makes me want to go,” Nakahara said with a laugh.

“If we can do a tour, it might be nice to include notable places in Kyoto that are surprisingly not well known,” Kiyotaka suggested.

“Like what?” Taniguchi tilted her head.

“For example, you’d be surprised how many people haven’t heard of Tanukidanisan Fudoin Temple.”

“No way. They don’t know Tanukidani?” Taniguchi, being a local, looked amazed.

Nakahara, who was from Kobe, gave a strained smile and said, “I don’t.

Where is it?”

“You really don’t know? It’s located past Shisen-do Temple. People call it ‘the second Kiyomizu’ because it has a stage that looks just like the one at Kiyomizudera Temple.”

“It’s also famous for granting traffic safety, so some people say to go there when buying a car,” Kiyotaka added.

“Huh, I didn’t know that,” Nakahara said, sounding interested.

“Kyoto’s Kukai pilgrimage is also surprisingly unknown,” Kiyotaka continued.

Nakahara blinked, evidently not knowing what that was either.

“First, To-ji Temple has a flea market on the twenty-first of every month...”

“That I know. It’s called Kobo, right?”

“Yes, named after Kukai, whose posthumous name was Kobo Daishi—the great teacher who spread Buddhist teachings. To-ji Temple, Jinko-in Temple, and Ninna-ji Temple are the three Kyoto temples associated with him, and it’s said that people used to visit them to pray for safety before going on the Shikoku eighty-eight temple pilgrimage. It’s also said that if you visit them on the first three days of the new year, you can evade bad luck for the rest of the year.”

Taniguchi nodded. “I see. We could have a tour that suggests going on the Kyoto Kukai pilgrimage before traveling.”

“In that case, we could also provide lunches, assuming the temples give us permission,” Nakahara added.

“Oh, that sounds nice. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to put together a trial tour and test it out.” Taniguchi nodded as she tapped away at the keyboard.

“I happen to be making a personal visit to the Kukai temples this weekend, so I’ll have a preliminary look,” said Kiyotaka.

“Oh?” Nakahara looked up. “If it’s for work, you don’t have to do it on the weekend.”

“No, I want to go on the twenty-first anyway.”

“Oh, for the flea market.”

Taniguchi shrugged and sighed. “You’re so dense, Nakahara. He obviously wants to go with his girlfriend.”

“Oh, huh, really?”

Kiyotaka chuckled. “Yes. We’re going on a trip during the upcoming holiday, so I wanted to do the pilgrimage beforehand.”

“Ohhh...”

Taniguchi smiled and said, “I bet the women who were admiring you in the cafeteria would be shocked to hear that. I want to tell them, but I don’t know if I should.” She raised a hand to her mouth.

“Don’t do it, Taniguchi. A department store is a place that fosters dreams.”

“You’re right. It’s like a certain theme park where there’s no one inside the mascots. There isn’t anyone inside Kiyotaka either.” Taniguchi nodded.

“No, I don’t mind if you tell people,” Kiyotaka said. “The person inside me is bare for all to see.”

“Don’t call it ‘bare,’” Taniguchi replied, looking down and giggling.

“Uh, anyway, let’s plan the event hall now...” said Nakahara.

“It’d be fun to do a behind-the-scenes exhibit of that theme park,” continued Kiyotaka. “We could call it, ‘These Are the People Inside, Ha Ha!’”

The other two laughed uncontrollably. As if drawn to the sound of laughter, a man in a suit peeked into the room and said, “Morning. Looks like your day is off to an energetic start.”

The three members of the sales promotion department bowed, startled by the sudden visitor.

“Good morning, Manager.”

“You’re early today.”

This man was Koki Kitashiro, the manager of Daimaru Kyoto. He was in his mid-fifties but looked ten years younger than that. Originally from Osaka, he was friendly and good at making conversation, so the employees loved him for

being a manager who was easy to talk to. Kiyotaka had gotten the opportunity to work at Daimaru Kyoto because the manager was friends with Kura's owner.

"I have a morning meeting, so I thought I'd look over the material first," the manager replied. "You three are early too." He sat down next to Kiyotaka and asked him, "Have you gotten used to the job yet?"

"Yes. Taniguchi and Nakahara are treating me well."

"That's good." The manager smiled. "So, how's the exam prep going for you two?" he asked, turning to the others and grinning mischievously.

"We're working on it," they said, shrugging.

Kiyotaka tilted his head. "What exam?"

"As ACKP members, they're working on getting their Kyoto certificates," the manager replied.

The Kyoto certificate—officially called the Kyoto Tourism and Culture Certification—was a test organized by the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce and Industry that certified someone as being an expert on Kyoto. There were three levels ranging from first class to third class.

"I see. Good luck to you both," Kiyotaka said, smiling at them.

"Speaking of which, do you have a Kyoto certificate, Kiyotaka?" Taniguchi asked immediately.

"I have a first-class one."

"As expected," the pair said in unison.

"I'm aiming for second class for now," said Nakahara.

"Yes, we can't take the first-class exam until we pass the second-class one anyway."

They clenched their fists. The manager nodded in satisfaction and picked up the documents on the table.

"By the way, what plans have the ACKP come up with?"

"Oh, um..." Taniguchi nodded and explained their ideas.

As he listened, the manager folded his arms and said, “I see. For the kimono idea, it’d be nice if we could get people living in Kyoto to use the service too.”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded firmly.

“Oh, so in addition to tourists, we can also provide locals with opportunities to wear quality kimono.” Taniguchi’s eyes lit up and she clapped her hands together. “I think it’s a good idea. Tourists will also be more interested in using the service if they know locals do.”

“True. Restaurants attract more tourists when they’re frequented by locals,” added Nakahara.

“Also,” the manager continued, looking down at a pamphlet with a floor map, “I think it’d be nice to have a fun campaign that gets people to explore every floor of Daimaru Kyoto.”

Taniguchi immediately spoke up. “How about a stamp rally?”

“Yes, something like that, but I’d like a twist.”

“A twist...”

Taniguchi and Nakahara furrowed their brows and hummed.

Kiyotaka stroked his chin and said, “Come to think of it, I once helped with a *Local Rangers* event at Hirakata Park. It had a game where the audience went around the park solving riddles, and they had a lot of fun.” *A lot happened behind the scenes, though*, he muttered in his mind before continuing, “How about having a riddle-solving rally at Daimaru Kyoto? We can ask questions related to Kyoto.”

“Oh!” Taniguchi covered her mouth. “That sounds really fun!”

“We can have a prize for people who get the answers right,” Nakahara added, approving of the idea.

“What would be good?” the manager murmured, looking up at the ceiling.

“If you go to all of the stops, you can take a picture with Kiyotaka, and if you get a perfect score, you can hug him.”

“Taniguchi, only my girlfriend would be happy to win a prize like that,”

Kiyotaka said with a smile. But on the inside, he felt slightly uncertain. *Would Aoi actually be happy?* He frowned.

Seeing his expression change, Taniguchi hurriedly shook her hands and head. "I'm joking, of course."

"Yes, I know. As for the prize, people might be happy with just a certificate like the Kyoto certification. It would feel like having Daimaru's seal of approval."

"Oh, a certificate," Taniguchi repeated, typing on her laptop.

"We can take our time coming up with the prizes and whatnot," said the manager. "For now, we've got a Kyoto quiz rally at Daimaru Kyoto. Sounds good to me. Let's go ahead with it!" He clapped his hands.

"Okay!" The three ACKP members nodded.

3

It was April 21, and Holmes and I were headed for To-ji Temple. It was within walking distance of Kyoto Station and had an impressive five-story pagoda. When Kyoto people thought of To-ji Temple, they thought of the flea market nicknamed Kobo, which was held on the twenty-first of every month.

I had come to Kobo before with Kaori. It had been December at the time, and the last Kobo of the year was called the Closing Kobo. Apparently that one had more stalls than usual, so it had been packed with people. I remembered it being difficult to wade through the crowds, so I braced myself when we entered the temple. Much to my relief, April's Kobo wasn't as busy as December's.

Just like the handicraft market at Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple, this market had a variety of goods on display. There were ceramics, kimono, accessories, tea leaves, takoyaki, deep-fried foods, a coffee shop, and perhaps because it was spring, I even saw a sign for grilled bamboo shoots.

"There are always so many different things being sold here," Holmes remarked.

"Yeah."

In contrast to his cheerful smile, Holmes's eyes were firmly fixed on the items

being displayed. It didn't seem like he'd found anything worthy of his attention yet. We enjoyed the lively market as we proceeded into the temple grounds. Praying at the temple was our objective today.

"This way, Aoi."

I felt like I could easily lose my bearings among all of these stalls, but he guided me to our destination without issue.

"To-ji Temple has a really long history, right?" I asked.

"Yes, it was built when the capital was relocated to Heian-kyo, and it's the only surviving remnant of the old capital."

I gulped.

"In the year 794—or the thirteenth year of the Enryaku period—To-ji Temple and Sai-ji Temple were built on opposite sides of the Rajomon gate. Unfortunately, Sai-ji Temple was lost to the ages," he explained as we walked. To-ji meant "east temple" and Sai-ji meant "west temple." He stopped in front of the main building and looked up at it. "This is the first part of To-ji Temple that was built—the main hall called 'Kondo,' or 'golden hall.' Notably, it is a combination of the Tenjikuyo and Wayo architectural styles, the former of which was based on the Song dynasty, and the center of the roof is raised and flat at the top. You can also see this style at Todai-ji Temple in Nara and Byodo-in Temple in Uji."

As I looked up at the Kondo hall, I took a small notebook out of my pocket and wrote down what Holmes had said.

He laughed. "You don't have to take notes."

"No, even though I always listen carefully to your explanations, I often forget some of the details later, so I decided to write them down."

Holmes looked down at me with amusement as I diligently jotted down my notes. "That's so cute. Can I hug you?"

I looked up from my notebook and vigorously shook my head. "No, you can't! Not in a place like this!"

"That's too bad." He smiled, not seeming disappointed in the slightest. "Now

then, shall we pray?”

We entered the main building and were greeted head-on by the principal deity, Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha. To the left was Gakko Bosatsu, the bodhisattva of moonlight, and to the right was Nikko Bosatsu, the bodhisattva of sunlight.

“Wow!” I gasped, awed by the divine triad.

Kondo’s Yakushi Nyorai was depicted with the seven buddhas in his halo. Yakushi Nyorai often had a medicine jar in his hand, but this one didn’t.

“It’s an old style,” Holmes explained.

The Twelve Divine Generals encircled the pedestal.

“Oh, that’s right. The Twelve Divine Generals protect Yakushi Nyorai and fulfill his wishes.”

It was noble, but I was reminded of the organization that worshipped Yakushi Nyorai and used cannabis to manipulate young people. *Controlling people’s faith is completely unacceptable*, I thought bitterly. I glanced at Holmes and saw that he had a slightly stern expression on his face. He may have been remembering the same thing.

Immediately noticing my gaze, Holmes looked at me and smiled gently. “Let’s put our hands together and pray.”

“Yes. For safe travels, right?”

We pressed our hands together in prayer and left the hall.

4

After leaving, I looked up at the five-story pagoda. “It really is amazing that this place has existed for so long,” I said earnestly.

“Yes,” Holmes murmured.

A common mnemonic used to remember the year of the Heian-kyo capital relocation was “sing, bush warbler of Heian-kyo,” because the first part was a homonym of the number 794. I suddenly thought of Yoneyama’s painting that

had been stolen, *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler*. I felt the frustration rising within me, and at the same time, I recalled his conversation with Holmes.

“Yoneyama mentioned before that you don’t buy any art for yourself,” I said.

Holmes paused before nodding. “Yes, I like burning them into my memory, but I don’t feel the desire to obtain them.”

I was about to ask “Why?” but stopped. It didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about it. *Maybe in the past, he accidentally broke a treasure he really liked or something.*

We avoided the hustle and bustle of the flea market as we left the temple grounds, heading for the parking lot.

“Shall we go to the next place?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, yes.”

Our next destination was Ninna-ji Temple. We were going on Kyoto’s Kukai pilgrimage, which consisted of the three temples related to Kukai: To-ji Temple, Ninna-ji Temple, and Jinko-in Temple.

5

We’d visited Ninna-ji Temple before, and I fondly remembered the Omuro cherry blossoms, though they were no longer in bloom. After praying there, we had lunch and headed to Jinko-in Temple, which was in Nishigamo, Kita-ku. It was located across the river from Kamigamo Shrine, at the foot of the mountain where the boat-shaped bonfire was lit during Gozan no Okuribi. It was apparently nicknamed the Kobo of Nishigamo.

At the entrance, visitors were welcomed by a large stone monument that said “Road of Kobo Daishi’s Protection.” We passed through the gate and walked through the temple grounds. There were far fewer people here compared to To-ji and Ninna-ji, which was understandable since the other two were World Heritage Sites.

“Does Kyoto’s Kukai pilgrimage have a fixed order?” I asked.

“No, I believe you can start from anywhere. If you visit the two that are World

Heritage Sites first, it feels very quiet here in comparison,” Holmes replied as if reading my mind.

“Yes. This is a calm and comfortable temple, though. I like it here.”

“Indeed. I do like the grand world-class temples, but I’m also fond of temples like this one that make you want to quietly copy sutras.”

I’m glad we both feel similarly, I thought as we prayed in the main hall.

When we turned to leave, Holmes’s phone rang.

“Sorry, it’s Taniguchi—my coworker at Daimaru.” He brought the phone to his ear and said, “Hello, Yagashira speaking. Yes, I’m in the middle of the Kukai pilgrimage. I’m at Jinko-in right now.”

Not wanting to feel like I was eavesdropping, I stepped away and walked around the temple grounds, not straying too far. According to the pamphlet, the temple’s name originated from a divine message received by a priest at Kamigamo Shrine: “Build a temple on the land where the spiritual light shines.” He’d had this temple built and named it Jinko-in, which meant “Divine Light Temple.”

“Aoi,” Holmes called, walking up to me while I was reading the pamphlet. “Someone my coworker knows is going to be coming here to see me. Sorry, but do you mind if we wait for them?”

“I’m totally fine with it. But why are they coming?”

“They live nearby and have something they want me to appraise. But since they have to prepare it, they won’t be here for another thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes was a pretty long time. They had probably made the decision to meet here based on the flow of the conversation rather than having planned it in advance.

Figuring we’d relax as we waited, we sat down and drank bottled tea. The temple grounds were very quiet and there was hardly anyone else around.

“Are we the only ones making the Kukai pilgrimage even though it’s the twenty-first?” I asked.

“It could be that we happened to come at a quiet time. Also, there are a

surprising number of people who don't know about Kyoto's Kukai pilgrimage. It started out as something to do before going on the Shikoku eighty-eight temple pilgrimage, after all."

I nodded in understanding. "Is that what our trip is going to be? The Shikoku pilgrimage?"

"No," Holmes said with a chuckle.

"Can't you tell me where we're going?"

"You've already waited this long, so let's keep it a surprise. It's a mystery tour." He held up his index finger.

"Fine..." I pouted.

We sat in silence for a bit, a comfortable breeze blowing by.

"Aoi, are you looking forward to our trip?" he murmured.

I hesitated, embarrassed. It felt like he was asking if I was looking forward to taking the next step in our relationship, so I couldn't help but look down.

"If you're not feeling up for it, I don't mind canceling it," he added.

"Huh?" I looked up. The smile on his face was one I'd seen before—it was the same smile he'd had when he'd broken up with me.

I quickly shook my head, assuming my indecisive attitude had caused a misunderstanding. "No, um, I really am looking forward to it."

Holmes fell silent and scratched his head. Now he was the one who seemed half-hearted about the trip.

"Could it be that *you* aren't feeling up to it?" I asked.

"No, that's not it at all." He looked straight at me and gave a resigned sigh. "Sorry. I can't lie to you."

"Huh?"

"I'm really looking forward to it. But there's also a part of me that isn't."

My heart pounded with unease. *I didn't expect him to actually be having second thoughts about the trip.*

“Why not?” I asked. My throat felt completely dry.

Holmes gently placed the palm of his hand on top of mine. “I’m happy when I touch you like this, and I have an instinctive desire to touch you further. But on the other hand, there’s also a part of me that wants to keep things the way they are...”

I couldn’t grasp what he was trying to say, and I could tell that I was making a puzzled face.

He placed a hand on his forehead, seeming defeated. “I should’ve told you when I invited you on the trip,” he mumbled with a sigh.

“Tell me what?” I asked, but my voice was so soft that it got lost in the wind.

“I couldn’t say it because I was afraid you’d hate me. But, perhaps because we went on the Kukai pilgrimage, I feel like it’d be cowardly to take you on this trip without saying anything. Yakushi Nyorai and Kobo Daishi might be angry with me.” He spoke in his usual tone of voice, but his face was filled with sorrow.

I closed my mouth and waited for him to continue.

He gently held my hand and said, “When I was training at the sake brewery in Fushimi, Ensho visited me and said something.”

“Ensho did?” I frowned.

“So I wondered why you wouldn’t lay a hand on her. At first I thought you were a coward when it came to women, but that ain’t it. I mean, you probably are a bit of one, but the root reason is something else. You’re scared of yourself, aren’t you?”

“You lose interest the moment you get something, right? That’s why you’re scared that if you get her, you’ll fall out of love.”

“You’re interested in a woman for once, and being infatuated with her makes you happy because it’s like you’re a normal person—but you’re paranoid that your feelings will fade once you sleep with her. So you can’t trust yourself. You’re scared that it’ll only be fun until the clothes come off; that after it’s done, you’ll wake up from the illusion of love and go, ‘What, that was it?’ Why don’t

you just admit it already? You ain't the kind of guy who falls in love in the first place. The proof is that you're purposely drawing out the fantasy right now, trying to get as much enjoyment as you can before making her yours."

After relaying Ensho's words, Holmes heaved a sigh. Not knowing what to say, I simply stared at the side of his face, my eyes wide open.

"I angrily denied it," he continued. "I want to believe that I'm not like that. I know I consider human beings completely different from material things."

I nodded silently.

"But to be honest, I don't know...because you're the first person I've ever fallen in love with like this." He squeezed my hand.

I now understood what Ensho had meant when he had showed up at Kura a while back and said, "Or maybe there's another reason... Yeah, it has to be that."

People are different from material things. That's common sense. But he must be worried because he's been through this before. I certainly don't want to ask about it or imagine it, but maybe he's experienced losing interest in a woman he liked after deepening their relationship. He might be afraid it'll happen with me too, and that's why he thinks it would be better to keep things as they are.

A bitter taste welled up in my mouth.

"So, part of me is willing to cancel the trip," he continued. "I'm a man, after all, so I'm not confident that I'll be able to abstain while we're there." He smiled self-deprecatingly. I remained silent, prompting him to nervously peer into my face. "What do you think, Aoi?"

"I..." I opened my mouth, but I didn't know what I wanted to say.

I wanted to stay on good terms with Holmes forever, the way we were now. The thought that his feelings might disappear into thin air if we advanced our relationship was heart-wrenchingly painful. Holmes was an honest person, so even if he felt bad for me, he wouldn't be able to pretend he still loved me. Most of all, I disliked the idea of him faking his feelings.

What do I want to do?

6

As we sat in silence, four people entered the temple grounds: a man who looked to be in his mid-forties, a woman in her early thirties wearing a bright-colored suit, and two younger women, perhaps in their late twenties. They looked around the area before shouting, “Oh!” and coming towards us.

“Kiyotaka,” said the woman in the bright suit in greeting.

“Hello, Taniguchi. You and the manager came too?” Holmes looked at her and the man in surprise. The woman was Taniguchi, his senior coworker at Daimaru Kyoto, and the man next to her was the store manager. Holmes quickly introduced us. “This is my girlfriend, Aoi Mashiro.”

My earlier shock was immediately overwritten by happiness and embarrassment at Holmes calling me his girlfriend. Blushing, I bowed and said, “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Aoi Mashiro.”

“Likewise,” said the manager. “I’m Kitashiro. So, you’re the one from the rumors...” He chuckled and smiled gently.

I shrank back. *What kind of rumors are they?*

“Nice to meet you,” said the coworker. “I’m Taniguchi.” She smiled cheerfully and bowed. “Sorry to bother you on your day off. These are...” She turned around and motioned to the other two women.

“I’m Yuko Otsuka,” said the gentle-looking one with soft, shoulder-length hair.

“I’m Ryoko Tabata,” said the thin, intellectual-looking one with her hair tied back in a ponytail.

They bowed. Both of them were pretty, but their auras were completely different. *Are they friends?*

“You’re sisters,” Holmes said confidently.

The women blinked in surprise.

“Huh? How did you know?” asked Yuko, baffled.

“We don’t resemble each other at all,” added Ryoko. “No one’s ever thought we were sisters before.”

The sisters both spoke in standard Japanese, but their intonation was that of Kansai locals.

Holmes pointed at his ear and said, “Your ears are very similar.”

Everyone was stunned. Meanwhile, my face stiffened. *I’ve seen this exact situation before.*

7

Since Yuko lived in the neighborhood and was friends with the head priest at Jinko-in, we were able to borrow a room inside the temple, and they even prepared tea for us. After giving our thanks, we sat down. Holmes and I were on one side of the table, while Taniguchi and the manager were sitting off to the side. Across from us were the two sisters who looked nothing alike, frowning bitterly. Yuko was the older sister and Ryoko was the younger one.

“The people from Daimaru said that you’re the grandson and heir of the famous Seiji Yagashira,” Yuko said. “Is that true?”

She probably has a hard time believing someone so young is an appraiser.

“Yes, but I’m still in training,” Holmes replied. “I’m working at Daimaru Kyoto right now to expand my views.” He presented two business cards: one from Daimaru Kyoto and one from Kura, the antique store.

“It’s true,” the manager said. “He’s the grandson of the nationally certified appraiser, Seiji Yagashira, and despite his young age, the industry recognizes him as a skilled appraiser himself.”

Yuko and Ryoko seemed relieved. They exchanged looks and placed something wrapped in cloth on the table.

“We’d like you to appraise this,” said Yuko. “Everywhere we go, we’re told different things.”

Holmes nodded, took his white gloves out of his inner pocket, and put them on. “I’ll begin, then.”

He unwrapped the cloth, revealing a set of tea utensils: a tray with exquisite curves on top of which sat ten tea bowls shaped like lotus flowers. The black tray, with its intentionally distorted curves, made the set look like lotus flowers floating on a pond at night. It was the first time I'd seen this artist's work, and I couldn't help but lean forward to stare at it.

Next to me, Holmes hummed and said, "These are Rengetsu tea bowls. The signature, leaf veins, and fruit are painted with an iron pigment, and the tea bowls are made out of hand-kneaded clay from Okazaki in Sakyo-ku. Rengetsu ware was popular from the Bakumatsu period until the Meiji period, so many fakes were produced, but I can assure you this is the genuine work of Rengetsu Otagaki. It has the local characteristics," he said fondly, holding one of the tea bowls.

"So it *is* real," Yuko said in relief, placing a hand on her chest. "Some places said it was only worth five thousand yen because it was a counterfeit."

"I see."

Ryoko then spoke up, asking, "How much is it worth if it's real?"

"Let's see..." Holmes stroked his chin. "It's in good condition, so perhaps 1.5 million."

The sisters' faces lit up.

"That much...?" Yuko remarked.

Ryoko leaned forward and asked again, "Would Kura be willing to buy it?"

"Yes, we'll gladly buy it if you're inclined to sell it." Holmes smiled.

"Oh, um, unlike my sister, I don't want to sell it," Yuko hurriedly added. "This was left to us by our mother."

"But she left it to both of us, which means half of it is mine, right?" Ryoko insisted. "Yagashira, would you buy half of the tea bowls? And would they be seven hundred and fifty thousand in that case? Or lower because they don't have the tray?"

Holmes frowned. "This set is worth 1.5 million because it includes the tray. If it were only five tea bowls, the value would drop significantly. Thirty thousand

per tea bowl at most, so about a hundred and fifty thousand for five.”

“What?” Ryoko’s eyes widened.

It must sound unbelievable to them, but this is often the case in the antique world. It’s not only the tea bowls themselves that affect the value, but also the condition of the boxes and strings they’re contained in. Whether something is part of a set or not is very important. Even a single missing tea bowl will lower the price. A set only really has value because it’s complete.

The sisters looked troubled.

Holmes quietly asked, “By the way, how do you two know Taniguchi and the manager?”

“Well...” Taniguchi began.

“Taniguchi isn’t really our acquaintance,” Ryoko interjected. “Our mother was a customer of Daimaru’s.”

“Yes, she was my customer back when I worked in out-of-store sales,” said Taniguchi. “She was on close terms with the manager as well.”

“You probably know who she is,” said Yuko.

“Huh?” I tilted my head.

“Our mother was an actress,” continued Ryoko.

“An actress?” Holmes and I murmured, impressed.

“But she wasn’t the kind of actress who played leading roles,” Yuko hurriedly added. “She was Noriko Otsuka, who everyone called the ‘mom actress.’”

“Oh!” I placed a hand over my mouth. Even I knew Noriko Otsuka. She played a lot of mother roles, perhaps because she was a traditional beauty with a gentle aura. As Yuko had said, she was called the “mom actress.” She wasn’t the type to play leading roles, but she was constantly appearing in TV dramas in supporting roles. In recent years, she had been acting in a lot of period dramas that my grandmother watched. The news of her death from illness was fresh in my memory.

“Noriko Otsuka... I’m sorry for your loss,” Holmes said with a solemn face,

lowering his head. I followed suit.

“The forty-ninth day has passed, so things have settled down,” said Yuko. It was customary to mourn for forty-nine days after someone’s death.

Since they’re Noriko Otsuka’s daughters, does that mean Yuko, the older sister, is single because she has the same last name, while Ryoko is married?

“Personally, I think of Noriko Otsuka more for her roles in period dramas than her mother roles,” said Holmes. “I watched *Meiji Restoration*, where she played Atsuhime’s advisor, and *The Inner Chambers*, where she played Kasuga no Tsubone.”

“Yes,” the manager said, nodding. “Noriko actually went to the people involved with those two dramas and asked them to let her play the roles. She began to appear in more period dramas after that.”

The sisters’ eyes widened as if they hadn’t known that.

“I see. Everyone had been calling her ‘the ideal mom’ in family sitcoms, so perhaps she wanted to break out of that mold. I also heard that she was passionate about charity work. Everyone was sad about the passing of such a wonderful person,” Holmes said quietly.

Ryoko sighed loudly as if she were exaggerating it on purpose. “She had a good public image, but in reality, she was the complete opposite kind of mother.”

“Hey!” Yuko glanced at her sister as if to scold her.

“Mom’s gone, so there’s no reputation left to keep up. She was careless with both money and men, and she was always getting divorced and remarried. We sisters don’t even have the same father. She didn’t care about the family, she barely did any housework, and the charity work was just to make her look good. She’d help complete strangers but ignore her own kids. She never came to any of our school events, not even parents’ visiting day.”

“Well, that was because she had to work,” Yuko said with a bitter smile.

“But she didn’t even come when she was at home. On her days off, she’d sleep until afternoon, get up in the evening, and go to Gion to play around.”

“That’s because she lived in that kind of industry. You can’t blame her for it.”

“You’re wrong. She thought of us as nuisances. She never gave us a single present for our birthdays or Christmas, did she? She always tossed us a ten-thousand-yen bill and that was it.”

“Mom was just a practical person who thought we should buy what we wanted. The most important thing is that when she divorced dad, she was the one who said she wanted custody of us.”

“That was just for her public image, wasn’t it? Actresses get divorced all the time, but giving up her children would have ruined her ‘ideal mom’ image.”

“So you say, but she cried with joy at your wedding.”

“That was just an act for the public to see. Also, wouldn’t it have been a weight off her shoulders to let go of one of her children? You were always taking care of her like you were her personal assistant, to the point where you turned down your boyfriend’s proposal when he was being relocated overseas because you were ‘worried about mom.’ You should’ve just married him instead of sacrificing yourself like that.”

Yuko fell silent in response to Ryoko’s relentless words.

“Right after that, she suddenly passed away due to illness. We found out that she’d donated most of her estate. The only thing she left us was this set of tea utensils. We were sure it must’ve been valuable, but the nearby antique store told us it was only worth five thousand yen.”

I nodded in understanding. *They must’ve asked Taniguchi if she knew any good appraisers.*

“Hey, Yuko, let’s sell this set and split the 1.5 million.”

“No. I think it’s better to keep it safe. Mom left it to us.”

“You know, when mom died, I was hoping she would reflect on how she treated us and left her fortune to us. But when we looked, she’d given all her money to other people and only let us have these tea utensils. I’m so mad! Let’s at least get *some* money out of them!” Ryoko slammed her hands onto the tatami mat.

“What are you going to do with the 1.5 million after you sell it? It’s a lot of money, but it’ll probably be gone so fast that you don’t even remember what you spent it on. At that point, it would’ve been better to keep the tea utensils themselves.”

“What’s the point of keeping them? It’s not like we’ll ever use them.”

“It’s not about using them. Don’t you understand? This is the first present mom has ever given us.”

Their mother had never given them any gifts for Christmas or their birthdays. This had been her first, last, and one and only present.

Ryoko, who would’ve understood her sister’s feelings more than anyone else in the world, gulped, turned away, and said, “She must’ve done it on a whim.”

“Um...” The manager spoke up, holding his hands up in an attempt to calm them down. “As someone unrelated, perhaps it isn’t my place to speak, but while it’s true that your mother had a whimsical side to her, it seemed there was meaning behind every one of her actions. She struck me as both a wonderful actress and an artisan of sorts,” he continued in a relaxed tone.

“Oh? Noriko Otsuka was that kind of person?” Holmes asked.

“Yes. Now that I think about it, she had something in common with your grandfather.”

“Oh, yes, he is that kind of person. Whimsical, but his actions have meaning.”

“Right?” the manager said cheerfully with a wide smile.

Yes, the owner does crazy things on a whim, but he puts deep thought into his words and actions. The sisters’ mother must’ve been the same way.

Holmes picked up one of the Rengetsu tea bowls and looked at the sisters. “Did you watch the dramas your mother acted in?”

“Yes, of course.” They nodded awkwardly.

“*Meiji Restoration* and *The Inner Chambers*, the period dramas she begged to be in, both depicted women who contributed to their eras. In *The Inner Chambers*, she acted out the struggles of Kasuga no Tsubone, who laid the foundation for her time. And in *Meiji Restoration*, she played the role of

Atsuhime's advisor, who watched over the woman as she pushed for a bloodless surrender. It's well known that Atsuhime and Princess Kazunomiya played major roles in the Meiji Restoration, but there were also lesser-known people who made great contributions." He placed the tea bowl between the two sisters. "These tea bowls were made by Rengetsu Otagaki, a Buddhist nun."

They looked at Holmes with puzzled expressions.

"Rengetsu was a poet and potter in the Bakumatsu period. She was a beautiful and outspoken woman. She became a nun after her husband passed away, and she spent her final years in retirement here at Jinko-in Temple. She was also a fervent philanthropist, and whenever Kyoto was struck by famine, she would donate her own money."

The sisters kept silent. The story must have reminded them of their mother.

"There's an anecdote about Rengetsu from the Meiji Restoration, specifically when Prince Taruhito Arisugawanomiya was leading the imperial army from Kyoto to Edo. Many people were watching from Sanjo Bridge, and Rengetsu, who was in the crowd, gave a strip of paper to Takamori Saigo, who was leading the Satsuma and Choshu forces. The following poem was written on it: 'Friend or foe, win or lose, 'tis lamentable when you consider we are people of the same country.'"

Whether you win or lose the war, both sides belong to the same country. Isn't it pitiful when you think about it that way?

I was awed by Rengetsu's poem. I didn't know how much of the story was true, but that must have been the kind of person she was—a strong, beautiful person who spoke her mind no matter who she was dealing with.

Taniguchi and the sisters seemed moved by the poem too.

"It's said that Rengetsu's poem may have been what compelled Takamori Saigo to pursue a peaceful resolution at the talks with Kaishu Katsu," Holmes said, placing a hand on his chest.

Everyone fell silent.

Holmes smiled and continued, "Thinking about it, I've never received a Christmas present from my parents either. Just like you, I was given money and

told to spend it on whatever I wanted. My mother passed away when I was young and my father was always busy with his writing, so I never told him about school events. Thus, he never came to them.”

Holmes must’ve been that kind of considerate person ever since he was young, I thought sadly.

“My father was a clumsy man and never seemed sure of how to interact with me. Before long, he holed himself up in his study to avoid me. He didn’t think of me as a nuisance; he was simply struggling because he hated how he couldn’t talk to his son properly.”

The sisters had sad looks on their faces. His experience must have been similar to their own.

“Eventually, my father began to write the things he wanted to say to me in his novels. By reading his books, I understood his feelings.” Holmes looked up at the sisters with a gentle face. “Perhaps your mother had something in common with my father? She may have been struggling with herself because she loved her children but couldn’t communicate with them. Perhaps she was hoping you would learn from watching the dramas she was in.”

The dramas that Noriko Otsuka had asked to be in were stories revolving around strong, unyielding female leads. No matter how drastically the times changed or what position they found themselves in, they determined what they could do, stood firmly on their own feet, and spoke their minds. She may have requested those dramas because of her wish for her daughters to be like that too.

“When you think about it that way, isn’t there a message in the Rengetsu tea utensils as well?” Holmes continued.

The sisters looked down at the tea bowl in front of them.

“Friend or foe, win or lose, ’tis lamentable when you consider we are people of the same country.”

“Please don’t fight.”

After her passing, she wanted the two sisters to join hands and live with determination and beauty like Rengetsu did. Maybe that’s why she didn’t leave

her estate to them.

“Our mother wants us to live like Rengetsu and be close sisters who would have tea together,” Yuko murmured, eyes welling up with tears as she picked up the tea bowl.

Ryoko pressed a handkerchief to her eyes and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Yes, there are ten tea bowls, so maybe she wants you to have tea with a lot of family members and trusted friends,” Holmes added. “I think her tears when Ryoko got married were genuine tears of joy. And she may have been praying that Yuko would also set out with her life partner.”

Yuko and Ryoko looked at each other. I could tell that neither of them intended to sell the tea utensil set.

“However,” Holmes continued, interrupting the heartwarming mood, “Rengetsu donated her personal funds. In other words, she used her money for what she believed in. As Yuko said earlier, 1.5 million is a large sum, but if you don’t have a clear objective in mind when you sell the set, the money will disappear before you know it. But if you do have a clear objective and you find yourself needing money for what you believe in, I think you should consider selling it.”

The sisters looked at each other again and said:

“Thank you. I don’t know what the future holds, but I want to treasure this tea utensil set our mother left us.”

“Yes, it’ll be our treasure—no, our family’s treasure. We’ll make sure to use it.”

There was no hesitation in their eyes.

“I see,” Holmes said, smiling gently.

8

After saying goodbye to the manager, Yuko, and Ryoko, Taniguchi turned around excitedly, looked up at Holmes, and said, “I expected no less from an appraiser called the Holmes of Kyoto.”

“No, I got that nickname because of my surname. Also, I don’t think it has anything to do with being an appraiser...”

“But determining if something is authentic is like being a detective. Thanks for letting me witness such an amazing scene. I enjoyed it.” She turned to face me. “Sorry for interrupting your date, Mashiro. I’ll get out of your way now.”

“It’s okay.” I shook my head. “I’m glad I was able to be here today, and I’m really grateful to you for the opportunity. Thank you.” I bowed.

Taniguchi blushed. “S-So cute. I think I know how Kiyotaka feels now. I felt something in my heart.”

“Don’t even think about it, Taniguchi,” said Kiyotaka, moving to stand in front of me. “She’s my girlfriend.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“You really are too funny,” Taniguchi said, placing a hand over her mouth and giggling. “Well then, thank you again for today. Enjoy the rest of your date.” She bowed and left the temple with a spring in her step.

Alone at the temple once again, Holmes and I walked to Rengetsu-an, the tea house where Rengetsu had spent her final years.

“This was the last place Rengetsu lived, huh?”

It was simple yet dignified. Today, it enshrined the immovable lord, Fudo Myo’o. We put our hands together and prayed.

As we left the tea house, I remembered the conversation we’d left unfinished. Holmes had revealed an unexpected truth about himself and asked if I still wanted to go on the trip.

What do I want to do? I stopped and looked up. Holmes was staring at me with gentle eyes.

“Holmes, about what you said earlier...”

“Yes?” He gulped.

“You realized Ensho was right about you even though you didn’t want to admit it, right?”

He nodded weakly.

“Why did you keep planning the trip?”

Did he come to the conclusion that it'd be fine if his feelings diminished? Or did he decide to postpone thinking about it until it actually happened?

Holmes grimaced and said quietly, “I wanted to try believing.”

My heart pounded at the unexpected response. “In...what?” I squeaked nervously.

“In my love for you,” he said sadly.

I felt my chest tighten. Holmes had come to a conclusion, made up his mind, and invited me. The rest was up to me. Thinking back, I'd been too embarrassed to face the decision myself. Somewhere in my heart, I'd created an escape route for myself—going on the trip and advancing our relationship was “because he invited me.”

My honest feelings are that I want to be with Holmes. When I'm with him, I want to hold his hand. I want to lean my cheek against his arm. When I do that, I find myself waiting for him to kiss me. And when my heart is strongly moved, I want to hug him. Even if I'm too shy to say it out loud, I can't resist the instinct to touch the person I love.

I slowly walked up to Holmes and leaned into his chest. “I want to go on the trip with you.” *No matter what happens.*

If Holmes's love for me disappears once we advance our relationship, then his feelings must not be real, in which case it'd be better for us not to be together in the first place. That would be extremely painful, though, so I really hope it doesn't happen.

I'll try believing too.

“Aoi...”

The wind blew, shaking the irises in the temple grounds. Holmes hugged me tightly, and with that, our Kukai pilgrimage ended. We would finally be going on our trip.

Short Story: Kaori Miyashita's Decision

April 21st, the day my best friend, Aoi, went on Kyoto's Kukai pilgrimage with Holmes, was my—Kaori Miyashita's—birthday. She had invited me to Kitayama Kochakan on the 20th, the day before.

"Sorry it's a day early," she said apologetically as we celebrated my birthday with delicious scones and tea.

I shook my head. "It's fine."

I'd never particularly wanted to celebrate my birthday with friends, so I made a point of not telling them when it was since returning the favor would be a pain. Maybe it was because I didn't want a superficial celebration. But it was different with Aoi—I knew she was sincerely wishing me a happy birthday. I appreciated her feelings, so it didn't matter whether we celebrated on the day itself or the day before.

"Also, here's your birthday present. Sorry it's so clumsy." She timidly held out a set containing a lace coaster, a pretty embroidered handkerchief, and handmade cookies. The coaster was in the shape of a pot and really cute. The handkerchief had flowers and my initials on it.

"Wow, thanks! They're really nice. And I love the cookies you make." Aoi's cookies obviously weren't pro-level, but they had a simple and addictive taste. They really did taste good. She'd given me some before and I'd been thinking I wanted to have them again, so I was happy to receive them. Most of all, I was touched that she'd put her heart into making them for me. "I'm so lucky to have a good friend like you. I know how Holmes feels. I want a girlfriend like you too," I said earnestly as I sipped my tea.

"Stop that," Aoi said with a laugh.

Even as a fellow woman, I found that mannerism of hers adorable. *Girls like this will be loved.* Just as I thought that, the words of a whimsical man crossed my mind: "*What do you think about going out with me, Kaori?*" I shook my

head.

“You’re doing Kyoto’s Kukai pilgrimage with Holmes tomorrow, right?” I asked casually.

“Yeah.”

“Does that mean Rikyu is going to help at the shop?”

“I think so. But he has judo practice, so he said he won’t be in until after 3 p.m., I think? What are your plans tomorrow, Kaori?”

She probably wanted to ask if I was going to meet up with that whimsical man—Kohinata—but couldn’t say it out loud. I still exchanged messages with him from time to time, but I hadn’t told him my birthday, so he wouldn’t have known.

“I’m going to the movies by myself,” I replied. “I’ve decided that every year, I’ll do what I want on my birthday. I’ll be the one to congratulate myself the most.”

“I really like that about you, Kaori. I think you’re amazing.”

The sincerity in her voice made me feel ashamed. I wasn’t lying about going to the movies, but my real objective was to stop by Kura, the antique store in Teramachi-Sanjo, beforehand. I knew Holmes definitely wouldn’t be there, and I’d confirmed that Rikyu wouldn’t be helping out until the afternoon. In other words, the manager would be the only one there in the morning.

If that’s the case, I’ll stop by Kura before the daytime showings at the theater begin. I’m turning twenty tomorrow too. No matter how far apart in age we are, we’ll both be grown adults. I think I’ve earned the right to confess.

As I chatted with Aoi, I secretly solidified my decision in my heart: *Tomorrow, on my birthday, I’ll tell the manager how I feel.*

Chapter 2: Their Departure and an Unsettling Encounter

1

Calling it the “day of destiny” might be going overboard, but at last, it was time for Holmes and I to set out on our journey. I got off the bus with my light pink rolling suitcase and headed to our meeting place, Kyoto Station’s center entrance. I was wearing a knee-length dress that was such a bright yellow that it was obviously brand new. It was a bit embarrassing because it felt like it gave away my enthusiasm.

I had made a couple of requests to Holmes for this trip. First, I knew he had his misgivings about it, but I wanted him to forget them for the time being and have fun. And if his feelings for me really did disappear, I didn’t want him to hide it. I wanted him to tell me honestly.

Sensing the gloominess that was about to take over my mind, I looked up. *It’s a trip. I should be excited.*

I could see Kyoto Station in all its modern and refined glory. There weren’t many people in front of it, perhaps because it was so early in the morning. Holmes was near the entrance, dressed casually but smartly in a jacket, shirt, and jeans. He was looking at his phone, his black suitcase standing beside him. When he saw me, he waved. His smile seemed to wipe away all my fears.

“Good morning,” I said, running up to him.

He blushed slightly and raised a hand to his mouth. “This is bad,” he muttered in a Kyoto accent. “You’re even cuter than usual this morning. Is this my state of excitement’s fault?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” he said, quickly switching back to standard Japanese. “That cute, bright-colored dress really suits you.”

“Thank you.” I felt my cheeks heating up.

“Now then, shall we go?”

“Yeah.”

We walked into the station, firmly gripping the handles of our suitcases. Our journey was beginning.

2

According to the calendar, this year’s Golden Week was four days long, from May 3rd to May 6th. Holmes and I had both taken the 2nd off, so we decided to start our trip then. It was going to be three days and two nights.

“Our destination will be a surprise,” he had said.

I still didn’t know where we were going as we boarded the 7 a.m. westbound shinkansen. I wasn’t used to riding it either, so the speed gave me a strange feeling. I’d been too nervous to get much sleep, and before I knew it, I had drifted off leaning against Holmes’s arm.

About three hours later, at 10:11 a.m., we arrived at Hakata Station.

“Oh, so it really is a Kyushu trip. I had a feeling it would be,” I said. I’d never been to this region of Japan before, and the moment I got off the train, I happily exclaimed, “Wow!”

“This way, Aoi. We’ll be getting on another train, but let’s rest in the dedicated lounge until it’s time.”

Dedicated lounge?

Before I could ask, a uniformed crew member led us to the escalator, where we headed for the third floor of Hakata Station. There, we took a break at a lounge called VENUS. A grand piano gave it a high-class vibe, and the crew served us tea, coffee, and sweets. There was also a presentation about a train, a speech from the company president, and a toast with champagne and non-alcoholic cocktails. My mind was in a state of confusion throughout the whole affair.

What is all this? Could it be... No, there's no way.

"Now then, it's time to board," said a crew member, leading us out of the lounge to an escalator at the end of a red carpet. Upon descending and walking out to track number five, we were greeted by a train the color of ancient lacquerware. It had a classic design and the luxurious cars had been polished to a shine. I'd seen it on TV before.

"Is this..." I stood before the train, dumbfounded.

"Yes," Holmes said, placing a hand on his chest. "It's the 7 Stars cruise train."

"I-It really is?!" I squeaked.

Even I knew the name. In Kyushu, there was a luxurious overnight train that offered a dazzling journey reminiscent of the Orient Express. It was often featured on TV programs, and my mother would watch them while eating senbei crackers and say, "It's a whole different world, but I'd love to go on a luxury trip like this when dad retires. It costs as much as an overseas trip, though."

I, too, had thought of it as a different world from mine.

"I've been wanting to ride the 7 Stars ever since it was created," said Holmes. "Its beautiful train cars were designed with excruciating detail, costing a total of three billion yen to construct. And look at the ancient-lacquer-colored body and the gold emblem. It's truly a work of art. I applauded in my heart when I saw it, amazed that Japan could build such a train. Being here right now feels like a dream." He gazed at the train in fascination.

I was lost for words. *No wonder this whole process has felt strange.* Ever since we'd entered the lounge, I'd been wondering what was going on. The crew had talked about the 7 Stars, but I'd assumed we were simply sharing the lounge with them. I hadn't thought it had anything to do with us. I'd been too scared to check with Holmes. *I can't believe we're going to board the 7 Stars cruise train. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this is the most luxurious overnight train in all of Japan.*

"Are we really going on the 7 Stars?" I squeaked.

Holmes nodded and said "Yes" in an "Isn't it obvious?" tone.

“I saw it on TV with my mom before. Tickets have to be booked half a year in advance, and they’re sold by lottery. They’re also non-transferable, so they’re supposed to be pretty rare.” *How did Holmes get tickets when they aren’t even transferable?*

“Naturally, I made full use of the methods available to me,” he replied, chuckling and placing an index finger in front of his mouth.

I nearly gasped. At times like this, his smile was so beautiful, yet devilish. *What methods did he use, exactly? He must’ve leveraged the Yagashira family’s connections...and his own.*

Holmes burst out laughing after seeing me stiffen up. “I’m kidding.”

“Huh?”

“Half a year ago, I applied for tickets just for fun. In other words, I got them legitimately. I was looking into overseas trips because I wasn’t expecting to win, but I really was fortunate. I’d been meaning to ride the 7 Stars someday.” He stepped towards the train.

I grabbed his sleeve without thinking. “Still, isn’t this way too much?”

“I was originally planning on taking you around Europe, so it’s within my budget.”

“Within your budget...” I smiled uneasily. *Whatever he says, I can’t help but feel awkward. Maybe it’s because I keep imagining how envious my mother looked.*

“Aoi, please don’t worry about it. First of all, this was a selfish choice I made based on my personal tastes even though we’re celebrating *your* birthday. I’m really happy that you came along with me. Besides, even if I didn’t ride it with you, I definitely would’ve ended up riding it with my grandfather one day.”

Right, this does seem like something the owner would like. It was easy to imagine him going, “Kiyotaka, I’m gonna go on that. Don’t you want to go too?” and I smiled.

“The concept behind the 7 Stars is ‘encountering a new life,’” Holmes said quietly, staring at the train car. “My world changed when I met you. So when I

thought about going on an important trip with you, I wanted it to be on the 7 Stars, if possible. Would you be willing to accept these feelings without any reservations?" He stood in front of the door and offered me his large hand.

My chest felt tight. "Holmes..." I couldn't believe he'd say that. My eyes welled up with tears. "Yes, thank you."

I took his hand and we boarded together. The train car had what looked like polished wooden flooring. Our belongings had already been delivered to our room, so I only carried my purse and Holmes was empty-handed as we walked down the aisle.

"As its name suggests, the 7 Stars is made up of seven cars," Holmes explained as if he were part of the crew. "The first car is a bar and lounge, while the second is the dining car. The third through sixth cars consist of normal suites, and the seventh contains the deluxe suites."

We walked through the antique-style train car. The 7 Stars was often compared to the Orient Express, and it really was hard to believe it was a train in modern Japan. It was like an extremely detailed work of art. The TV program I'd seen had called it "a moving luxury hotel," and it certainly felt that way.

"Does the name '7 Stars' mean it goes beyond five stars?" I asked.

"It's possible, but I heard it was named that because of Kyushu's seven prefectures and the seven tourist attractions it covers."

"Seven tourist attractions?"

"Yes," Holmes said, nodding as we passed through the fifth car. "Nature, cuisine, hot springs, history, culture, spiritual hotspots, and the train itself. Kyushu has other well-designed sightseeing trains that tell their own stories, but the 7 Stars is considered a cumulation of them all. All the designers involved were well-known. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Ooh," murmured the other passengers, who had been listening to his explanation.

"Oh, look at this decorative plate." He pointed at a framed porcelain plate.

"This is Arita ware, right?" I asked.

“Yes, I heard that the 7 Stars has so much Arita ware on display, you could call it an Arita ware exhibition,” he said happily.

The passersby turned around in surprise. I heard whispers around us:

“That boy is really something, huh?”

“Is he a rich kid from somewhere?”

Yes. Holmes is a rich kid from Kyoto, I answered in my head.

“Oh, I’m just so happy to be here,” said Holmes. “Thank goodness I didn’t have to come with my grandfather.” There was a spring in his step. He really did seem happy.

He seems mature, but he also has this childish side to him. I smiled at the contrast.

“This is our room,” he said, bringing me to the deluxe suite at the end of the seventh car.

I’d seen this room on TV too. It was the most luxurious suite on the 7 Stars. When I saw the two beds next to each other, I couldn’t help but look away in embarrassment. Aside from the beds, the room also contained a comfortable-looking antique sofa and the kind of desk you’d find in a study. But what stood out the most was the observation window in the back and the exclusive view it provided. I stood there and gaped, too shocked for words.

“Yes, it really is nice,” Holmes said. “I figured if we were going to go on the 7 Stars, it should be in this room. I really am glad I got it.” He beamed in front of the window.

“Holmes!”

“Yes?” He turned to face me.

“Hold on a second! Are we really staying in such an expensive room?”

“Yes. If we’re coming this far, why not go all the way? I really was lucky to win the ticket lottery. Oh, look, this lampshade is Arita ware too. It’s the work of a living national treasure.”

I didn’t know what to say to his sparkling eyes.

“Is this room not to your taste? I’m sorry for making you accommodate my preferences.” He frowned apologetically.

“Oh, no, that’s not it. I’m just overwhelmed.” I hurriedly shook my head.

“I understand your distress, or should I say, concern.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t want your important first time to be on a train, right?”

“What?” I looked up, startled.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be sleeping on the train tonight, but tomorrow we’ll be staying at a hot spring inn in Kirishima. Your twentieth birthday is tomorrow, after all...so I’m thinking it’ll be there,” he said, lowering his voice at the end and blushing slightly.

My face felt like it was on fire. He was completely wrong about what was bothering me, but I was too embarrassed to say anything.

“So,” he said, clearing his throat, “I won’t do anything tonight, so please relax.” He smiled elegantly, and I nodded, still unable to speak. “Oh, but I know everyone has different tastes. If you would prefer to do it on the train, then—”

“That’s not it!” I protested. My face had probably turned even redder.

“I’m kidding,” he said, holding an index finger in front of his mouth.

“You’re as wicked as ever.” I pouted.

“My apologies. It’s almost time for lunch, so I’m going to wash my hands.” He went to the bathroom. “Oh, Aoi, the sink is Arita ware too! This is another piece by a living national treasure.”

What can I say? It’s the usual Holmes.

3

At 11 a.m., the 7 Stars departed Hakata Station. The train ran very slowly and smoothly. It was as quiet as the shinkansen, without any clickety-clack sounds. *This must be another one of the 7 Stars’ wonders.*

“Aoi, it should be time for lunch, so let’s go to the dining car.”

“Oh, okay.”

We left the seventh car and headed to the second. As we walked through the train, I looked up at the walls and arched ceilings and was again amazed by the meticulous attention to detail. The glass doors connecting the cars were decorated with a very sophisticated star logo and the words “7 STARS.” The dining car had a wood aesthetic, and it was filled with a brightness that evoked feelings of nostalgia, gentleness, and cleanness. It was set up with sofas facing each other across square tables. The window frames were designed like Japanese sliding paper doors, which made me feel at home. Outside, Kyushu scenery was rolling by.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured in fascination.

“Indeed.”

We admired the view as we made our way to our seats. After a short while, a sushi lunch arrived at our table.

“Oh, it’s sushi!” *I love sushi.*

“It’s from a famous restaurant in Fukuoka.” Holmes held his chopsticks elegantly as usual, looking pleased as he ate.

While admiring him, I took a bite too. The fresh, plump seafood made me close my eyes as I relished it. “It tastes so good.”

“Kyushu’s seafood is exquisite.”

“Yes, I can’t believe how delicious it is.”

With my hunger sated by the exquisite sushi lunch, my feelings of being overwhelmed started to calm down. I wondered again, *Did Holmes really get these tickets legitimately by winning the privilege to buy them through the lottery? I feel like he would’ve used all sorts of methods...but I also don’t think that would’ve worked for the 7 Stars. First of all, he was originally suggesting a trip to Europe.*

“Holmes.” I leaned forward a bit.

“Yes?” He looked at me.

“You were originally thinking of going on an overseas trip with me, weren’t you?” But since my parents asked us to keep it within Japan, it ended up being a domestic trip.

“Yes.”

“But you applied for the lottery anyway, not expecting to win. What would you have done if I was allowed to go overseas?”

“I would’ve prioritized the 7 Stars.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. We can go overseas anytime we want, but 7 Stars tickets aren’t easy to obtain.”

So for Holmes, this was a better outcome than going abroad.

“Somehow, I’m not surprised you got them. You really have the power to influence things.”

“No, it was just a stroke of luck.” He smiled gently.

“Did you have other trip ideas ready in case you didn’t win the tickets?”

“Yes, quite a few. The first one I thought of was visiting your hometown, Saitama, and continuing on to Okunikko. I wanted to see the place where you grew up, and I’d have been able to meet your grandparents too.”

“Holmes...” I was kind of touched that he’d thought of that.

“But I dismissed the idea because it would be awkward for you if we inadvertently ran into your ex.”

That’s just like him to say.

“I also thought it’d be nice to go to ancient cities that are different from Kyoto, like Kanazawa, Kamakura, and Kurashiki. A pilgrimage to Ise Shima, Izumo Grand Shrine, or Miyajima would’ve been nice too. I also considered Hokkaido, but it’s best to go north in summer rather than May. The Shikishima tour of east Japan and the Mizukaze tour of west Japan were candidates too, but if we were going to ride a sightseeing train, I would’ve rather taken the 7 Stars first. In the end, I got my number one choice.”

“I’m really glad.” I nodded. “The other options were great too.”

“We’ll save them for the future.”

We smiled at each other and chuckled.

4

After lunch, we returned to our room and relaxed on the sofa, watching the scenery go by. Holmes had brewed coffee for us, and the room was filled with its rich aroma. Accompanying the beautiful rural landscape of Kyushu was Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 6*, also known as the *Pastoral Symphony*. The sprawling green hills shone in the sunlight, captivatingly beautiful.

“This is really relaxing,” I said.

“Indeed,” Holmes replied earnestly, sipping his coffee. “It’s like a dream, being able to ride this train with you.” He looked at me and grinned.

I smiled back and nodded. “I think so too.”

“Speaking of dreams, I wanted to ask you a favor during this trip.”

“What is it?”

Holmes laid down and rested his head on my lap without hesitation. “I’ve always wanted to lie in your lap.”

“Holmes...” My heart skipped a beat as I looked down at him. I gently reached out and touched his silky black hair. I gazed at his smooth, pale skin and intelligent features. “You actually like to be spoiled, huh?” I said quietly as I stroked his hair.

“Only by you,” he said, keeping his eyes closed.

It was true that he wasn’t the kind of person who would demand attention from just anyone. Suddenly, I remembered the conversation from the other day, when Holmes said he never told his busy father about school events.

“Holmes, weren’t you lonely in elementary school?”

He smiled slightly, seeming to have guessed what I was referring to. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?”

“If you ask me whether I *really* wanted my father to come to my school events, I don’t think I cared that much, which is why I never told him to begin with. But at the same time, it was kind of awkward not having anyone come.”

I nodded in understanding.

“It’s possible I was lonely, though. One time, Ueda came on parents’ visiting day. He must have looked up when it was. At the time, I told him he was being nosy, but truthfully, I almost cried. I’ve always been a difficult person.” He laughed.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

“But please don’t get the wrong idea. I consider myself fortunate to have been raised with love. My father had his own way of comforting me.”

“His novels?”

“That too. He also played the cello for me.”

“Oh, right, the manager is good at playing the cello.” The manager was raised by his uncle (the owner’s younger brother), who was a university music teacher and master cellist.

“When he didn’t know what to do, he would play the cello for me, using practice as an excuse. I would fall asleep listening to it.”

“That really does sound comforting.” Relieved, I wiped the tears in my eyes so that he wouldn’t notice I was crying.

“Thank you.” He had noticed anyway. He got up. “Aoi...” He brought his face closer and our lips touched. Heat radiated from the soft sensation.

The gentle *Pastoral Symphony* continued to play in the train car.

5

After that, the train stopped at Yufuin Station. There were two sightseeing courses available here. The first one was getting off the train and exploring Yufuin by bus. The second was staying on the slowly moving train and having

tea while looking at the Yufuin scenery. You had to select your course prior to the trip. If it were me, I probably wouldn't have been able to decide. Switching to the bus and getting a thorough experience of Yufuin sounded appealing, but so did teatime on the slowly moving train.

Did Holmes have a hard time deciding too?

"I applied for the teatime option at my own discretion," Holmes said with confident eyes.

"I would've been fine with either, but why did you choose that one?"

"If we want to go sightseeing on a bus in Yufuin, we can do that anytime in the future. But seeing the scenery of Yufuin from inside the 7 Stars is a rare opportunity," he said smoothly.

That makes sense. Exploring Yufuin by bus or car is something you can easily do on your own, but riding the 7 Stars isn't. What can I say? "You never cease to amaze me." I sighed.

"Huh? How so?" He tilted his head in confusion.

6

After the bus passengers got off the train, the 7 Stars rolled into motion once more and we headed for the dining car. I was looking forward to the sweets that would be served for teatime.

"Oh, I should bring my digital camera," Holmes said, turning on his heels. "You go ahead and sit down, Aoi."

"Oh, okay."

I continued on to the second car by myself and sat down at our designated table. I hadn't brought my digital camera because I thought my phone would be enough.

I glanced out the window. The scenery passing by was very beautiful and peaceful. As I gazed at it idly, the dining car door opened and two chatty young women came in. From the look of it, they were university students or office workers. Their dresses and purses were luxury brand items, so perhaps they

were from rich families. Most of the passengers on the 7 Stars were in their fifties or older. There weren't many young people, so the two stood out a lot.

In which case, we probably stand out even more.

"That guy just now was hot, wasn't he?" one of them said.

"He was going towards the seventh car. That's the deluxe suite! He must be really rich!"

Their conversation startled me. *Could they be talking about Holmes?*

"Let's talk to him if he comes here."

"No way. What would we even say?"

"I take out my phone and ask him to take our picture. Then I ask him to take one with us."

"Oh, that's smooth. You really are a man-hunter who never misses her target."

I hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but their merry conversation reached my ears on its own, making me feel uneasy. Both of them were gorgeous, especially the one being called a "man-hunter" by her friend.

As I was feeling anxious, the door opened and Holmes appeared. The two women squealed and exchanged looks. The man-hunter proceeded to carry out her plan.

"Excuse me, could you take our picture?"

So, they were talking about Holmes.

"Sure," he said, accepting the phone with a smile.

The women shyly posed for the picture.

"Thank you," the man-hunter said, taking her phone back from Holmes. "Um, could we take one with—"

Suddenly, Holmes turned in my direction and started running.

Huh?

The next thing I knew, there was a loud clatter behind me.

“Are you all right?!” Holmes shouted as he passed me in order to prop up the old man sitting in the back, who was about to fall out of his seat.

Startled, I stood up. The man’s face was white as a sheet. His body was convulsing and his lips were dry.

Holmes asked the man something before shouting, “Excuse me, does anyone have any soda?! Please bring me soda!”

“Huh? Soda?!” Everyone was taken aback.

“Here!” shouted a terrified crew member, running up to Holmes and the man with a can of soda.

Holmes carefully poured the soda into the man’s mouth as he held him steady. After a little while, the man’s spasms began to subside. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. His complexion improved, but the train temporarily stopped and an ambulance came to take him to the hospital.

Holmes looked out the window, seeming relieved. “Thank goodness it didn’t develop into something more serious. It would’ve been terrible if he’d fallen and hit his head on the floor.”

“Why did you give him soda?” I asked.

“Based on his symptoms, I thought he might’ve been suffering from low blood sugar, so I asked and he said he was diabetic. In cases like that, it’s good to drink soda as a stop-gap treatment.”

“Oh!” the people in the train car exclaimed, impressed. There were some dissenting voices too, though, muttering things like, “Even I know that first-aid measure” and “Yeah, I know the soda trick too.”

In this case, what I thought was amazing about Holmes wasn’t so much his knowledge but the fact that he had instantly run over to prop up the man. It was one thing to know what to do, but another to actually be able to do it.

Come to think of it, that time when we were watching the kabuki show at Minamiza Theater and Kisuke Ichikata was injured, Holmes also ran to help him without hesitation. I want to be the kind of person who can move on impulse too.

“Shall we sit down?” he asked.

“Oh, right.”

We sat down at our table, and a crew member came to us right away. “Thank you so much. Thanks to you, the passenger was not seriously hurt. We truly appreciate your assistance,” he said, bowing several times. “I will prepare your tea now. I apologize for the delay.”

The crew member laid out cups of fragrant black tea and Yufuin’s renowned roll cake. The roll cake seemed simple at first glance, but the refined sweetness of the cream and the moist sponge cake complemented each other perfectly. It was very fluffy and felt like it was melting in my mouth.

“It’s delicious. I can’t get enough of it!” I closed my eyes, savoring it.

Holmes nodded. “It really is. I heard the bakery that makes them always has quite a long line to get in. Oh, look, Aoi. It’s Yufuin’s famous horse-drawn wagon.” He looked out the window as he spoke.

I followed his gaze to a white horse pulling a sightseeing wagon. “That’s a really pretty horse.”

“I’d like to take a tour of Yufuin on one of those too.”

“Same.”

As we were talking, I inadvertently noticed that the two women sitting behind Holmes were looking at us. They were the ones who had asked him to take their picture. They seemed displeased as they glanced at us. From the way their lips moved, I could tell they were saying, “What? *That* girl is with him?” I awkwardly looked down.

“I’m glad the weather has blessed us with a beautiful view of Mount Yufu,” Holmes said, interrupting my thoughts.

Startled, I looked outside and saw the majestic mountain under a bright blue sky. “You’re right; it’s really pretty.”

“It’s also called the Fuji of the Bungo Province, and it’s been an object of worship since ancient times.”

“I can see why people would call it that.” The mountain exuded the same

sense of divinity I'd felt when I'd seen Mount Fuji.

We continued our usual friendly conversation as we gazed at the beautiful scenery, the train gently rocking as it slowly moved along. Holmes looked only at me, not paying any heed to the envious eyes fixed on him. I secretly vowed to myself that I, too, would look only at him, not worrying about what others were thinking about me.

7

The afternoon teatime ended, and the passengers who had been sightseeing by bus returned to the train. It was finally time for dinner. Although I was nervous about having dinner on a luxury overnight train like the Orient Express, I was still excited about it. I tried to imagine what the menu would be.

"There's a dress code for dinner," Holmes said casually, as if it were no big deal.

"Huh?" I turned around, startled. "The 7 Stars has a dinner dress code?"

Before the trip, Holmes had told me to bring a proper dress so that I would be prepared for any occasion, so I did have one. That said, being told now that there was a dress code really threw me off.

"Yes," he replied.

This really is a moving luxury hotel.

"I'll get changed first and go to the lounge," he continued. "You can take your time to get ready." He carefully took a black garment bag out of his suitcase, laid out the suit, and took off the shirt he was wearing.

I gasped—he looked lanky when he was wearing clothes, but his shoulders were surprisingly well-built and his arms were toned. It must have been because he did martial arts. Embarrassed, I looked away.

"I don't mind if you look," he said.

I paused before saying, "It's okay, I'll pass."

Holmes gave an amused chuckle. "That's good. To be honest, I was

embarrassed.”

“That has to be a lie.” *He didn’t seem embarrassed at all.*

“No, I feel insecure because I have pale skin despite being a man. When I try to get a tan, my skin just turns red temporarily. It doesn’t tan at all.” He sighed. Based on the rustling sounds behind me, I could tell that he was putting his arms through his shirt sleeves.

“You have insecurities, Holmes?”

“Of course. That’s why I don’t like swimming in the ocean.”

“You don’t?”

“I like looking at the ocean, but when it comes to swimming, healthy bodies stand out on the beach, so my pale skin makes me feel pathetic.” I heard him tighten his necktie. “But I don’t mind going to the beach if it means I can see you in a bikini.”

“J-Jeez!” I turned around and saw Holmes dressed in a shiny, charcoal gray formal suit. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of his sleek black hair, smooth pale skin, and elegant facial features. He looked so good in his formal suit that I felt overwhelmed.

“I’ll be waiting in the lounge. Feel free to take your time.”

“Okay...”

He left the room.

He’s going to be by himself in the lounge looking like that? The women from earlier suddenly came to mind, and I started to panic. *Isn’t that like sending a rabbit into a den of beasts?*

“I should hurry.” I quickly took out my garment bag, which contained the dress Holmes had given me for my eighteenth birthday. It had a chic design with white lines on a black base, French sleeves, a moderately cinched waist, and a lightly flared skirt that reached my knees. I didn’t have many opportunities to wear this dress. Thinking about it, that birthday party might have been the only time I had. “It really is cute.” Back then, I had thought it was a little too mature for me. Now, on the eve of my twentieth birthday, it felt more fitting than it had

two years ago.

After changing, I gathered my hair and pinned it up. Since our departure had been early in the morning, I was only wearing sunscreen and tinted lip balm at the moment.

“I bought these just for today,” I said to myself, taking my makeup pouch out of my suitcase and hurrying to the bathroom. Inside the pouch were the items I had bought the other day after working up the courage to go to Daimaru Kyoto’s cosmetics section and having them teach me how to apply makeup.

First, I prepared my skin with primer. Then I began applying foundation, picking up the powder with the sponge and spreading it evenly over my whole face from the inside to the outside. The beauty advisor had recommended powder foundation because it would bring out the youthfulness of my skin. I carefully applied it around my eyes, then closed my eyes and applied it to my eyelids as well. I checked my face in the mirror and nodded.

Next were my eyebrows. I used the powder tip to apply color to the inner ends of my eyebrows, then the pencil to extend it the rest of the way. It was important to make them look natural.

Afterwards, I applied light pink eyeshadow that had a bright, soft feel. And lastly, I applied lipstick with a lip brush.

“Good, I did it right.” I placed a hand on my chest, relieved that I’d been able to remember the instructions and glad that I’d been brave enough to walk up to that counter for help.

I put on a light green necklace in the shape of an aoi flower and changed into formal shoes. They, along with the dress, were gifts I had received from Holmes. I looked in the mirror. Perhaps I was trying too hard, but at any rate, I looked more mature.

8

Having finished my preparations, I nervously left my room and headed for the first car, where the lounge was. I was kind of anxious, and since my hair was tied up, my neck felt cool.

Upon entering the lounge, I saw a jet-black piano and an oval bar counter under soft lighting. A woman in a suit was sitting at the piano, playing a mellow jazz tune. Some of the passengers were lounging on sofas with glasses of wine in their hands, while others were standing and chatting.

Holmes was standing in front of the counter, his back to me. The woman from earlier—the gorgeous one called a “man-hunter” by her friend—was talking to him. She was wearing a simple black dress with a low neckline that exposed her shoulders.

“Oh, you’re from Kyoto?” she said. “I’m from Tokyo. I wanted to go to New York for this holiday, but my dad wouldn’t let me. He said it’s too dangerous to go abroad right now.”

“I see,” Holmes replied.

“Have you been to New York, Yagashira?”

“Yes, several times.”

“For work?”

“Yes, although half of it was more like training.”

“Half of it was training? What does that mean?” The woman giggled.

Even though the lounge was noisy with people talking, I easily heard their conversation as if I were listening from up close. I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. Holmes looked really mature, talking with an adult woman in the 7 Stars lounge. It was as if he wasn’t the Holmes I knew.

The woman noticed me standing behind Holmes and giggled suggestively. “The young lady you were with earlier, is she the daughter of an important business partner?”

“An important business partner?” Holmes tilted his head slightly.

“Yes, you were speaking formally with her, after all. I assumed she fell in love with you and asked her rich parents to get you to come on the 7 Stars with her.”

Holmes’s shoulders trembled. He was probably laughing. “Oh, is that how it looked?”

“Yes, I got the idea that you were being forced to accompany someone’s child.” The woman touched Holmes’s shoulder and took a step forward. “I feel a bit sorry for you. Would we be able to share a meal after this trip? Since we’ve become acquainted on the 7 Stars, I’d like to treasure this connection we’ve made.” She may have already been drunk. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the alcohol, and she twisted her body as she looked up at Holmes with moist, dreamy eyes.

Holmes doesn’t know I’m here. What will he say to her? My heart pounded furiously.

“I’m a merchant, you see,” he suddenly said.

“Huh?” The woman blinked.

“We’re barely scraping by, but we’re an honest business. Perhaps because of that, there’s a part of me that loathes the ‘hard sell.’”

“R-Right.” The woman nodded hesitantly as if she didn’t understand what he was talking about.

“First of all, when someone is giving you the hard sell, it’s rarely for anything good. That may be why I hate the practice so much.”

I could only see Holmes’s back, but I could easily imagine his expression and gestures. He was surely placing a hand on his chest with a perfect smile on his face.

“What?” The woman’s eyes widened. It was the face of someone who finally realized he had been indirectly calling *her* the not-so-good product being pushed at him.

That’s right. Holmes is a wicked Kyoto guy: soft on the outside but sharp as a katana on the inside. He was so ruthless that I was actually starting to feel bad for the woman. *Why did I think Holmes was a rabbit for even a second?*

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he said, quickly turning around. His eyes widened when he saw me standing behind him. “Aoi?”

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting.” I gave a slight, awkward bow as I walked up to him.

He put a hand over his mouth and averted his eyes as if troubled.

Maybe he's embarrassed that I saw what happened just now. Thinking about it, that woman got awfully close to him. If I couldn't hear their conversation, it could've looked like he was flirting. He must be concerned that I misunderstood the situation.

"Oh, um—"

Before I could say, "I'm not misunderstanding anything," Holmes ran a hand through his bangs, pushing them up, and said, "I can't do this."

"Huh?"

"You're too cute. And wearing the things I gave you is completely unfair," he mumbled, blushing slightly. My heart fluttered. He gently took my hand and said, "Sorry, I lost my composure for a second. You look beautiful. So much so that I want to abandon dinner and the party and pull you by the hand back to our room."

He placed a light kiss on the back of my hand, and I felt an electric current run through my body. The shock, amazement, and sweetness of it all were making me weak in the knees.

People are watching!

The people around us were acting like they didn't notice and pretending to be enjoying their conversations, but their eyes were glued to us. Naturally, the man-hunter was staring at us too.

"Shall we go to our table?" Holmes asked.

Dinner was going to be served in the dining car. We left the first car lounge to go to our designated seats in the second car. When we reached our table, Holmes casually pulled my chair out for me as usual. I could sense the people around us gasping at his smooth move. I even heard someone whisper, "I'm jealous of that girl," making me blush furiously. I shrank back as I sat down, embarrassed by everything that was happening.

After listening to the relaxing music for a while, our food was brought to our table. It was a multi-course meal, with each dish being an original creation that

incorporated plenty of Kyushu ingredients. Holmes and I toasted, he with white wine made at a winery in Yufuin and I with yuzu juice, since I was still a day away from turning twenty. We had seafood carpaccio, spinach terrine, oven-baked sea bream with cardinal sauce, abalone steak, thick grilled slices of Momiji-brand pork loin, white rice, red miso soup, and pickled vegetables. Dessert was a velvety pudding made from Nagasaki mandarins. Everything was delicious.

After the very satisfying dinner, we smiled at each other and said, “That was great,” as we returned to the first car. It was well into nighttime now, and the lounge looked more like a bar. I sat down, feeling daunted by the mature atmosphere.

“Is something bothering you?” Holmes asked with smiling eyes.

I shrugged and said, “I just think you’re amazing. It’s like we’re in different dimensions, or different worlds.”

Holmes blinked. “Don’t say that. Are you mistaking me for some kind of rich boy?”

“I’m not mistaking anything. You *are* a rich boy from Kyoto, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely not. The real rich boys would get angry if they heard that. Kyoto’s rich boys are incredible,” he said earnestly.

I tried to imagine the “real” rich boys and laughed. “Yeah, I guess they would be.”

“Besides, even my friend from university, Kohinata, is going to Europe and Egypt this Golden Week. His travel expenses are probably higher than ours. Do you think he’s a rich boy?”

Kohinata is going abroad, huh? I thought as I answered, “You’re right; I don’t.” *I wonder why Holmes seems like a wealthy person, then?*

“I think it’s all a matter of values. Everyone spends money on different things. For example, some people see cars as a status symbol and will buy a luxury car that’s beyond their means. On the other hand, I tend to spend my money on experiences,” he said, taking an elegant sip of his wine.

“Experiences?”

“Yes. Just like the person who buys a car unsuitable for their standing, I spend money on experiences that are unsuitable for mine. I believe that such experiences will benefit me in time. I think traveling abroad on a shoestring budget is a great experience too, but I’m not fond of it. I would rather use the same amount of money to stay at a nearby five-star hotel and experience upper-class life.”

“I see.” *I believe it. That really sounds like what he’d do.* “Come to think of it, you mentioned this before.”

I recalled what Holmes had said in the past.

“Aoi, money is meant to be spent on the experiences you consider the best. That way, the economy moves, your heart is enriched, and with your newly gained energy, you work and earn money again. It’s a good chain reaction.”

“When I told my mother what you said, she answered, ‘That’s a great, decisive mindset, but it doesn’t apply to a housewife who doesn’t earn her own money.’”

“Your mother said that?”

“Yes. She quit her part-time job to become a full-time housewife, and she seems to feel guilty about doing what she likes when she has no income.”

“Is that so? I don’t think there’s any reason to feel guilty.”

“None at all?”

“This is only my opinion, but I think she can think of the household as a company.”

“A company?”

“Yes. For example, in the case of a family with a housewife, let’s say the home is the company, the working husband is the sales department, and the housewife is the accounting department. The sales department brings in funds for the company, while the accounting department manages the money and ensures that the sales department can do their job easily. This is how the company runs, so it shouldn’t be only the sales department that gets to do what

they want. The accounting department should also take pride in being employees who are contributing to the company. There's nothing to feel guilty about. I think the accounting department should also take breaks and enjoy their own hobbies. If it energizes them to work harder for the company, wouldn't it be for the best? Of course, they would have to take the company's budget into consideration while doing so."

"I see. It's just like you to think of it that way." It was always interesting to hear his views about money.

"What would you like to spend your money on, Aoi?"

"Well...I'm not really sure, but I think it might be experiences for me too. Right now, I want to go around the world to see art."

"We're the same," Holmes said with a happy smile.

"But unlike you, I think traveling abroad on a shoestring budget sounds fun. I'd like to try it."

"Please invite me when you do."

"Huh? I thought you didn't want to go on that kind of trip."

"What do you mean? Any trip is luxurious if I'm with you," he said casually, making me choke on my drink.

Then, I heard cheerful laughter coming from behind Holmes.

"You really are amusing," said a vaguely familiar voice. "Do you change stances so quickly by shedding your skin, snake man?"

Confused, we turned and saw a tall, grinning man who seemed to be in his mid-thirties, with a natural light hair color and a gentle face.

Where have I seen him before? Oh, right. It's Shiro Amamiya.

There was a sharp glint in Holmes's eyes for a moment, but he quickly smiled and stood up. "Fancy meeting you here, Shiro Amamiya. Oh, right, you go by Kikukawa now."

"Long time no see, Kiyotaka Yagashira, a.k.a. Holmes of Kyoto."

Shiro Amamiya—now Shiro Kikukawa—put on a harmless smile and placed a

hand around the waist of the beautiful woman standing close to him. The woman was wearing a deep red evening dress and had straight black hair down to her waist.

“Don’t act so familiar,” she said curtly, giving Shiro’s hand a light slap. From the intonation of her words, I could tell she wasn’t Japanese.

Shiro sighed and shrugged. “This is the woman I’m crazy about. Isn’t she cold? I’m envious of you lovebirds. Let me introduce you. This is Yilin Jing. You must’ve at least heard of her, right? She’s the daughter of Zhifei Jing.”

I wasn’t familiar with the financial world, but even I had heard the name before. He was an influential businessman who had become a billionaire during the so-called “China bubble.”

“What brings you two to the 7 Stars?” Holmes asked. They certainly didn’t look like lovers.

“Lady Yilin is very interested in Japanese culture, you see, and she begged her father to take her on the 7 Stars. Her father was busy, so I was granted the privilege of being her chaperone. I’ve proposed to Yilin many times, and I even have her father’s approval. He said, ‘Yilin is my fourth and youngest daughter, so she should do as she pleases.’”

“Well, I don’t like you that much,” Yilin said, crossing her arms and turning her face away.

“Pretty cold, isn’t she? Even for our rooms, she’s sharing a room with a female attendant, and I’m with her bodyguard.” Shiro looked at the man and woman standing behind him as he spoke. The man, presumably the bodyguard, had a large build and was wearing a suit. The slender woman beside him bowed as soon as she made eye contact with us. She seemed to be Yilin’s attendant. “By the way, Holmes, I’d like to speak to you about something. Do you mind if we sit here?”

Holmes looked at him warily, but he seemed to be interested in what the man had to say, so he replied, “Go ahead,” stood up, and moved to sit next to me.

“Thank you.”

Shiro and Yilin sat across from us. The beautiful Yilin looked at us, put on a

perfect smile, and said “Hi!” with a little wave of her hand. From the look of it, she had taken a liking to Holmes. Shiro was stylish, but he wasn’t a handsome young man. Perhaps Yilin was only interested in looks.

“I wanted to talk business with you,” said Shiro.

“Business?” Holmes frowned.

“Yes, business. Currently, Japan’s economy is completely ruined. It’s a poor country clinging to the illusion that it’s still the economic superpower it was not so long ago.”

Holmes listened to him in silence.

“After falling into this pathetic state, what do you think Japan has left?”

“Could it be the Japanese brand?” Holmes answered immediately.

Shiro’s eyes lit up. “You really do catch on fast. The only thing Japan has left is its reputation for cleanliness and good quality. It’s like a fallen noble family that has nothing left but the family name. But now, even that brand is in jeopardy.” He spread his arms and shrugged.

“So, what do you want from me?” Holmes asked. He was smiling but he didn’t try to hide his suspicion.

“I read your thesis about the influence ancient Kyoto’s culture had on the world. It was quite fascinating. Your respect for Kyoto is commendable,” Shiro said with a slight hint of sarcasm.

Holmes smiled gently. “Of course. I believe that those who live in Kyoto must vouch for its good qualities.”

“I see. So that’s a merchant’s duty too.” Shiro seemed satisfied.

“Perhaps.”

“I’m sure you can sense that right now, Japanese art and culture, including Kyoto’s, are more in demand overseas than domestically. I want to make a business out of that. I hear you’re well known in the art industry because of—I mean, in part thanks to Seiji Yagashira’s influence. I want you, a connoisseur, to find works by talented artists. They don’t have to be by famous artists as long as they suit your taste. Then, I’ll sell them to foreign collectors. That way, the

young artists get money and an environment where they can further develop their talent. Not a bad idea, right?”

Shiro was offering to sell Holmes’s selected works of art to foreign collectors. That in itself didn’t sound like a bad idea. But...

“I decline,” Holmes replied. I was a bit surprised by how quickly he turned him down.

Shiro furrowed his brow. “Don’t you think it deserves a little more thought than that? It’s not a bad deal, don’t you think?”

“Yes, the idea isn’t bad on paper. However, I believe that when doing business, an idea is not good unless the partner is trustworthy. I don’t want you as a partner,” Holmes said with refreshing candor.

Shiro scowled, and Yilin laughed when she saw his face.

Personally, I was relieved. The offer didn’t sound bad, but I felt really uneasy about it for some reason. As Holmes said, the most important aspect of business was trust, not the nature of the work itself.

“What a shame. Can I negotiate with you some more, though?”

“There’s no need for negotiation.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that.” Shiro glanced at the bodyguard standing behind him.

The man nodded and brought out a Boston bag. I gulped, wondering if it might’ve been filled with wads of cash. Holmes watched them with an icy glare.

“I bought these as a present for Yilin, since she likes Japanese art,” said Shiro. “I thought they’d get her attention.” He signaled to the man, who proceeded to take two hanging scrolls out of the bag and unroll them in front of us.

I gasped. They were *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler* and *Mouse*, the two paintings that had been stolen from Yoneyama, and they were undeniably authentic.

“Wonderful ink wash paintings, don’t you think?” he asked. “I got them at an auction in the UK.”

“The winning bid was supposed to have been placed by her father, Zhifei Jing,” Holmes said without hesitation.

Shiro narrowed his eyes in amusement. “Knowledgeable, are we? Could it be that you had your eyes on these as well? I didn’t want to give my name, so I borrowed his. Everyone backed down when they heard Mr. Jing’s name, perhaps because they didn’t think they could win. So I was able to get them for a low price.”

“You could have obtained them easily without going to the trouble of winning an auction. Oh, but then the money wouldn’t have changed hands. Sorry, I should’ve known.” Holmes rested his chin on his hand and chuckled, but his eyes weren’t smiling one bit. He seemed convinced that Shiro was the mastermind behind the thefts.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Shiro said, his expression unchanged.

“I think you know exactly what I mean, so I won’t allude to it any further.”

“You really are an unpleasant man.”

“I think the feeling is mutual. So, what are your terms?”

“I want you to work with me just once. I want the Yagashira family’s seal of approval. If you promise you’ll work with me, I’ll give you these scrolls. Not a bad deal, right? You only have to help me once.”

Holmes gave an exasperated sigh. “There’s no way I would work with you. If I did, I’d be dragged into an inescapable darkness. You’re like a drug.”

“That’s harsh. But you know, if you refuse this offer, these paintings will never return to your hands again.”

“How can you say ‘return’ when they weren’t mine to begin with?”

“But Ryosuke Yoneyama painted these of you and your girlfriend, didn’t he?”

Holmes froze as he was reaching for his wine glass and glared at Shiro.

“She seems more attached to them than you are,” the man continued. “She’s been staring at them this whole time and there are even tears in her eyes. Don’t you want to get them for her?”

I hurriedly wiped the tears from my eyes. Like he said, I hadn't been able to take my eyes off of the paintings. I had seen *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler* in person before, but this was my first time seeing the real *Mouse*. Both of them were incredibly beautiful. The same paintings could never be created again. When I thought about how Yoneyama must've felt when they were stolen, I couldn't help but feel frustrated and bitter.

"As much as I want to grant her every wish, I can't stray from the right path to do so," Holmes declared. "My girlfriend wouldn't want that."

I was touched by his resolve. I did want to return these pieces to Yoneyama, but I didn't want Holmes to do anything unethical.

"All right, I'll give up on bringing you over to my side, then."

Just as Shiro was about to stand up, Yilin grabbed his wrist. "Hold on, Shiro."

"Yes, what is it?" He smiled obediently like a butler.

"This means I can have the hanging scrolls, right?"

"Yes, they're yours."

"I see." Yilin nodded and looked at Holmes. "Hey, you're called Holmes, aren't you?"

"It's only a nickname, but yes," Holmes replied.

"I'm a big fan of Sherlock Holmes. If you're smart enough to be called Holmes, I wonder if you can figure out a mysterious incident that happened at my university. If you can solve it right here and now, I'll give you these paintings."

"Yilin, what are you doing?" Shiro asked, surprised.

"They're mine, so I can do what I want with them, right? Fine, you can give them a condition too," Yilin grumbled, flipping her hair.

"All right. Holmes, if you can solve the case that happened at Yilin's university, we'll give you the hanging scrolls. But if you can't..."

"Are you going to tell me to help with your work?" Holmes asked.

"No, you wouldn't accept that condition. I want to negotiate with Aoi instead." Shiro looked at me.

“Huh? Me?” I pointed at myself, baffled.

“Yes, if Holmes fails to solve the mystery, I want something of yours.”

“What?”

“You might not be able to comprehend this, but everything in this world has demand. This item is particularly valuable when it comes from a young Japanese woman. Your hair has grown quite a lot since we last met, hasn’t it?”

Holmes’s face went pale. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes, I do. If you lose this bet, can I have Aoi’s hair?” he asked, staring straight at me.

I gaped. I had been growing out my hair and carefully maintaining it so that I could tie it up if I wore a kimono at some point. To be honest, I didn’t want to give it to him. But then again, it was only hair. It would grow back.

Shiro grinned as if he could tell that I was imagining myself with a bob cut and said, “Oh, by the way, I’d like *all* of it, starting from the roots.”

“Huh?” *So basically, if we lose the bet, my hair will be shaved off...* I looked at Yoneyama’s scrolls again and bit my lower lip, remembering the painter’s face when he was about to burst into tears. “I understand. I’ll accept this condition.”

Shiro smiled happily while Holmes’s eyes widened.

“No! What are you thinking, Aoi?!” Holmes protested. “You grew out your hair so carefully. If he takes it from the roots...you’ll be bald!”

Shiro laughed in amusement.

Holmes is right to be angry. Even I hate the idea to the point where I already want to take back what I said. But...

I squeezed Holmes’s hand and said, “Yes, I know what it means. But I have faith.”

“Huh?” Holmes looked confused.

“You’ll solve this case for me, won’t you?” I asked, looking straight at him.

I only agreed to this because I have Holmes. Accepting the condition was just for form’s sake. I know for sure that he’ll be able to unravel the truth.

Holmes gave me a defeated look and said, "I'm glad you believe in me, but I can't agree to this." He squeezed my hand back.

"But Aoi already agreed," said Shiro. "Should we have Aoi solve the case, then?" He rested his chin on his hand.

"No, I'll do it."

Holmes didn't say he'd agree. But he let out a small yet forceful sigh and looked up.

9

The 7 Stars was still moving at a steady speed. Everyone in the lounge was chatting and drinking wine or champagne. The passengers around us seemed to be enjoying themselves very much. It was only our table that seemed to be in a different world, as if we were cut off from our surroundings.

A new bottle of wine was brought to our table. It was a red wine from a winery in Kyushu. The glasses gave off a mellow aroma. While everyone else had wine, I was drinking a rich grape juice from the same place. Since it was in a wine glass, it didn't look any different from the wine.

"All right, let's have a toast to reset the mood," said Shiro, cheerfully picking up his glass. The rest of us did the same, Holmes with a cold expression, Yilin with a smile, and me so nervous that I could tell I looked tense.

We raised our glasses but didn't clink them together. Shiro was the only one who said "cheers." Yoneyama's two paintings had been put back into the Boston bag.

"So, what was the mysterious incident that happened at your university?" Holmes asked, clasping his hands together in front of his chin.

Yilin took a sip of her wine and sighed. "I'm studying medicine at a state university in San Diego. So this happened in America."

She uncrossed and recrossed her legs as she spoke. It was a seductive movement that would have left most men ogling her, but Holmes was completely unfazed. He simply waited for her to continue.

“There was an abandoned house on the edge of town. No one went near it because it was creepy, but one day, the bodies of four students from my university were found there. They had needle marks on them, so at first, it seemed like the result of young people getting too deep into drugs. But that wasn’t the case. Someone else had drugged them. They were very diligent students.” She lowered her eyes, seeming depressed. It made me wonder if the deceased students had been people she knew. “The strange thing is that all four were lying in separate rooms, and each room had a day of the week written in chalk on the wall.”

“Day of the week?”

“Yes, they were Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. But the students had been killed on a Saturday, and what’s more, the handwriting belonged to the students themselves.”

“Hmm. Who was the first person to discover the bodies?”

“A group consisting of two young couples who snuck into the house in the middle of the night to do something naughty.”

“So the four who died were students at the same university. Were they in the same department too?”

“No. The Tuesday room was Sean, a biology student; the Wednesday room was Natalie, an oceanography student; the Thursday room was John, an engineering student; and the Friday room was Mark, an economics student. They were all in different departments.”

“But they did interact with each other. Were they in the same club?”

“How did you know?” Yilin asked, curious.

“If the days of the week were written by them, that means they entered the abandoned house in a conscious state. They presumably went there of their own volition. In that case, with all four of them being from the same school, it’s natural to assume they went there together.”

Yilin nodded, satisfied by his answer. “Yes. They were in different departments, but they shared a common hobby. Unsurprisingly, since they were diligent students, that hobby was reading. Their favorite genre was

detective novels, like those by Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, and so on. Apparently, they first started talking when they saw each other in the library, holding books by authors they all liked. After that, they started their own book club where they discussed the books they read. They even played a game where they tried to guess the culprit in books they hadn't read yet. But around that time, there were strange incidents happening in town."

"Strange incidents?" I tilted my head.

"Young women were going missing. One of them was found dead, and there was a strange note written on her back in permanent marker."

"A note?"

"It was those days of the week again. 'Tues Jim,' 'Wed LA,' 'Thurs club,' and 'Fri NY' were written on her back like some kind of schedule."

I felt a chill run down my spine.

"The whole town was freaked out by the news, but it seemed to light a fire under those detective novel fans. They decided to get to the bottom of the mystery themselves, and the incident happened not long after that." Yilin placed a hand on her forehead, an anguished look on her face.

Holmes, his hands still clasped in front of his chin, said, "In short, the book club members were pretending to be detectives. While they were investigating a murder, their bodies were found in an abandoned house. The four of them were lying in separate rooms, and each room had a day of the week written on the wall in chalk in their own handwriting. The cause of death for all four was drugging by an unknown party. Am I correct?"

Yilin gulped and nodded.

"Indeed, it *is* strange."

"Right?"

"By the way, Yilin, you seem to know quite a bit about the inner workings of the book club. Were you a member as well?"

"No, I wasn't one of them. A friend in my department was, but not me." She

shook her head sadly.

“Was your friend one of the four deceased?”

“No. There were other people in the book club besides those four.”

“How many?”

“The club had around ten people in total, maybe? They came and went as they pleased.”

“In that case, why didn’t you try to join them?”

“Huh?”

“You wanted to be part of the club, didn’t you?”

Yilin blushed at the upfront question. “The group that gathered in the library were mostly students on bursaries or loans, who had to work to support themselves. Because of that, they hated me. They would all glare at me when I walked by.” She shrank back as if remembering the experience.

“So, you couldn’t tell them that you wanted to join in.”

“Exactly. I do live a spoiled life because my family is rich, but it also means I’m used to this kind of treatment from others.” She gave a hollow laugh and shrugged.

“But since you love reading, you wanted to join them. That’s why you went to the library and watched them from afar. You enjoyed watching them talk about books, but you were also envious.”

She averted her gaze, perhaps because she was lost for words. My chest ached for her. I imagined her in a corner of the library, watching the book club members and wishing she could join them even if they hated her. *Maybe she’s not a bad person.*

“Holmes, could you not bully her so much?” asked Shiro. “You’re always so quick to barge into people’s hearts.” He gave an exaggerated shrug.

“My apologies,” said Holmes. “What happened with the incidents in town after that?”

“Huh?” replied Yilin.

“I suspect the disappearances stopped even though the culprit hadn’t been caught.”

Yilin thought for a second. “Now that you mention it, yes. The culprit wasn’t caught, but no one else went missing.”

Holmes nodded.

“Have you figured something out, *Holmes*?” She gave him a challenging look.

“Well...let’s put the case aside for a moment. Don’t you think the book club’s attitude towards you was strange?”

“Huh?”

“Why would they openly glare at you just because you were rich?”

“Like I said before, they’re struggling financially, so they instinctively dislike people like me. That must be it.” Yilin crossed her arms with a bitter look on her face.

“I do think there are people like that in the world, but it’s strange that it was the prevailing attitude in the club. Regardless, you’re very knowledgeable about the club’s affairs. This is because your friend was reporting their activities to you, right? Can I assume that friend is a woman?”

“Yes...” she said in a low voice, nodding and looking down.

Holmes made a pained expression. “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I have an idea of the answer, but a terrible image came to mind at the same time.”

“What do you mean?” Yilin leaned forward, a stern look on her face.

“I’m going to tell you a theory that will be very unpleasant for you, but you should feel free to dismiss it as just a wild idea of mine.”

“Sure, tell me.”

Next to Yilin, Shiro looked at Holmes in amusement, his arms crossed.

“There was a female student,” Holmes began as if telling a story. “Her family

was poor, but she worked hard and got into university on a scholarship. On campus, she immediately noticed a beautiful, wealthy woman named Yilin Jing. She approached her, thinking she would benefit somehow from being her friend.”

Yilin stared ahead, not saying anything or moving. I noticed her gulp.

“Despite appearances, Yilin was disappointingly passive and not the flashy type at all. Her favorite thing to do at university was go to the library and read books. There, she saw the book club and wanted to join them in their fun. That was when this student got an idea: she could join the book club before Yilin did. With her proactive nature, she befriended the club members and joined their group. Then, she told them nasty half-truths about Yilin to deceive them into hating her, which made it so that Yilin couldn’t approach the club. The student looked at Yilin’s lonely, envious face and basked in a feeling of superiority.”

“What?” Yilin gaped.

“This student proceeded to give Yilin detailed reports on the book club’s affairs, pretending it was out of kindness. Yilin, who wanted to join the club, listened very eagerly. The other woman couldn’t get enough of it. But—and this is purely my conjecture—she wasn’t actually interested in reading or the book club’s activities.”

The color drained from Yilin’s face.

“One day, a young woman’s body was found in town. There was a strange note left on her back, which encouraged the book club to try to get to the bottom of the mystery themselves. The student wasn’t interested in the investigation, but she went along with their detective game to make Yilin jealous.” Holmes sighed. “This is where my story becomes frightening,” he warned. “Perhaps by coincidence, the student discovered the horrifying truth behind the missing people.”

“The horrifying truth?” Yilin and I asked in unison.

“The truth behind this incident may be human—no, organ trafficking.”

“Huh?” We gasped.

“The key is wuxing—the five elements in Chinese philosophy. Tuesday,

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday correspond to fire, water, wood, and metal, respectively. These elements are also associated with organs: fire is the heart, water is the kidneys, wood is the liver, and metal is the lungs. The first body that was found had probably failed to be collected due to some kind of accident. The note on the back indicated where each organ was to be sent.”

“Tues Jim,” “Wed LA,” “Thurs club,” and “Fri NY.” They were the names of places or people to send them to... The thought rendered me speechless.

“The student’s casual detective work resulted in her discovering the truth before anyone else. Instead of reporting it to the police, she decided to sell her friends to that horrifying organization and make a lot of money. I imagine the organization told her to prepare four suitable people, one for each of those organs.”

Yilin wordlessly placed a hand over her mouth. I wanted to cover my ears.

“The student brought four of the club members to the abandoned house, telling them she’d figured out the mystery. She told each of them to wait in a separate room and had them write a day of the week on the wall. When they were done writing, she drugged them. She was in the same department as you, which would be the department of medicine. Giving them an injection would be a simple task. The club members collapsed where they were and the student left the scene. The organization would soon come to collect the four people. However, they hadn’t planned for the intruders. When the intruders came and found the club members, they were shocked and called the police. It probably took some time for them to get over their initial terror before they could make the call. During that time, the club members, who had been in a sort of suspended animation, ended up actually dying. As a result, the student failed the job, didn’t get the money, and became a murderer.” Holmes heaved a sigh. “This is the gruesome scenario that came to mind,” he said to Yilin with a look that said he hoped it wasn’t the real answer.

Yilin remained seated, overcome with shock. Her face was pale, which was understandable considering she had just heard a story about her so-called friend deceiving her and murdering four people. A moment later, she stood up without a word, turned on her heel, and left the lounge.

Shiro sighed and shrugged. “You’re as ruthless as ever. But that might’ve been good medicine for the naive young lady.”

As Shiro was about to stand up, Holmes asked in a low voice, “That terrible friend of hers was set up, wasn’t she?”

“What do you mean?”

“Yilin’s friend happened to discover the truth behind the incident and tried to join the organization herself. At first, the organization may have thought they’d found a good pawn. However, since she didn’t know much about the underworld, they wouldn’t have worked with her on equal terms. Recall that only one day of the week was written for each of the four club members. It’s unlikely the organization would only harvest one organ per person. As was seen with the first body discovered, they would take everything they could. Since Yilin’s friend didn’t know this, I suspect that they offered her the price of one organ per person. However, she turned out to be greedier and more dangerous than they expected. She was problematic, so they decided to cut her off. In the first place, there was no need to put people in a state of suspended animation when kidnapping them. Sleeping pills would’ve done the trick. So the organization turned her into a murderer to keep her mouth shut and withdrew from the area. They left the days of the week on the wall, presumably thinking that her handwriting would become evidence against her. They wouldn’t have expected her to make the victims write the days of the week themselves.”

Holmes gave a long sigh.

Shiro smirked. “I see.”

“By the way, you aren’t involved with that organization, are you?”

“You really are harsh. Where’s your proof?”

“I don’t have any proof, but it occurred to me that one of the reasons the organization cut her off could have been that they found out she was close with Yilin. It would’ve been problematic if Yilin were to notice something. Now, I’m not saying you’re the ringleader. You aren’t the type to take on leadership roles. Instead, you’re like a hyena; you’ll stop at nothing if you catch the scent of money. That’s why I wondered if you were connected to the organization. It’s really just a wild idea I had, though.”

“How rude. There’s no way I am.” Shiro snorted.

“Yes, I’m aware that I’m being rude.” Holmes stood up, grabbed Shiro’s right wrist, and yanked it forward until it nearly touched the tip of his nose. “But if it’s true, I won’t let you get away with it.”

I could tell that Shiro was scared for a moment.

Holmes let go and smiled. “I sincerely hope that your ‘Japanese brand’ will not include such things.”

“Do your rude remarks ever end?” Shiro quickly returned to his usual self and his shoulders slumped. “I heard your father was a novelist or something. Did you inherit your powerful imagination from him? I don’t mean to condone your rude outburst, but I must excuse myself now. The lady needs me.” He left the lounge car at a brisk pace.

The bodyguard with the Boston bag and the attendant who had been with him were already gone. They had probably followed Yilin the moment she left.

Holmes had likely solved Yilin’s mystery and won the bet, but my heart couldn’t cheer up. We hadn’t gotten Yoneyama’s scrolls back, but I couldn’t bring myself to complain about it. The awful incident had left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Aoi, let’s go back to our room,” Holmes said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Okay.” I nodded.

Chapter 3: Reflected in One's Eyes

1

Holmes and I left the lounge car and continued walking through the train. It was pitch black outside, so the windows reflected our figures like mirrors.

When we reached our room in the seventh car, I sat down on the bed with an exhausted sigh. *That was a truly horrifying case.*

Suddenly, I was hugged from behind. I flinched in surprise. "Holmes?"

"There's a lot weighing on my mind...but for now, I'm just glad you didn't have to give your precious hair to that man," he muttered, squeezing me tighter. He sounded genuinely relieved.

"I'm sorry, Holmes," I said, touched.

"You should be," he sighed. "Offering your hair for someone else to use is one thing, but using it for a bet and giving it to a man like *that*? Please don't do that."

"Yes, I really am sorry." I looked down, feeling guilty. Even I thought it was stupid of me to have accepted that deal.

"But regardless of what happened—even if I hadn't been able to solve the case—I wasn't going to give that man your hair."

I turned around and looked up at him.

"I never agreed in the first place," he continued, "and I was ready to stop him at all costs. I'll protect you," he said, patting my head.

I felt like I was going to cry. "I didn't have the slightest intention of selling my hair either. I had faith in you. I only accepted the deal as a formality to get the paintings back." *I only did it because I was one hundred percent confident in Holmes. Even though I know nothing in the world is absolute, I was certain that he'd be able to pull it off.* "But I regret it. I'll never do that again."

“Good,” Holmes said weakly, reverting to his Kyoto accent. “I can’t imagine you being bald...” He placed a hand on his forehead.

“Yes, I’m sorry.” I lowered my eyes glumly.

“This won’t do.”

“Huh?”

“I’m going to punish you.”

He hugged me tightly again and kissed me. My selfish action must have made him anxious, because unlike any of our previous kisses, this one was a little rough. Before I knew it, my body was being pressed against the bed. I could sense his emotions, which made me feel even guiltier.

As I was reciprocating the dizzying kiss, there was a knock on the door. We froze and looked at each other in silence. His face had taken on a serious tone. My face, reflected in his eyes, was also dreadfully serious.

Another knock. “I apologize for interrupting your rest, Mr. Yagashira,” came the solemn voice of someone I assumed was a female crew member.

Holmes and I looked at each other again and nodded. “Coming,” he said, standing up and fixing his disheveled clothes and hair on his way to the door.

I quickly got up and straightened my hair and clothes too. *I suddenly feel really embarrassed...*

Outside the door was, as expected, a crew member. “I’m very sorry,” she said, bowing several times.

“It’s fine,” said Holmes. “Did something happen?”

I looked at the clock. It was 10 p.m. *She must have an important reason for visiting a guest’s room at this hour.*

“Um, a passenger in the sixth car is calling for you,” she said timidly.

“Very well.” Holmes nodded.

Could it be Yilin? I quickly followed Holmes and the crew member.

However, it wasn't Yilin waiting for us in the sixth car.

"This was taped to my door!" exclaimed the beautiful woman Holmes had rejected earlier—the one who had been called a man-hunter. She was holding a piece of paper that said "Cheap Product's Room" and screaming hysterically. The words looked like a man's handwriting, with very jagged letters.

Next to the woman was her roommate, who had a troubled look on her face. There were also two women and a man present, all with bitter expressions on their faces.

"It appears she found a harassing message taped to her room door," the crew member whispered to us.

"This is the notepaper that's provided in each guest room," Holmes remarked calmly. "It looks like it was written with the same ballpoint pen too." He looked at the other three passengers who had presumably been called here just like we had. "Who are they?"

The crew member bowed and began introducing them. "This is Mrs. Hirakawa from the fourth car and her daughter, Mrs. Misawa."

Hirakawa was a plump, cheerful-looking, late-middle-aged woman. Misawa looked to be in her mid-thirties and didn't resemble her mother. She had short hair and seemed uptight.

The two of them bowed awkwardly. The crew member then turned to the man, who looked like he was in his mid-forties, and said, "This is Mr. Kuroishi from the fifth car."

Kuroishi scowled. He seemed like the untalkative type.

"Hello, I'm Kiyotaka Yagashira."

"I'm Aoi Mashiro."

After our introductions were complete, Holmes looked at the crew member and asked, "So why did you call us here?" He tilted his head.

Indeed, why did they call us here? Genuinely confused, I glanced at Holmes. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes weren't in the slightest. I unconsciously stepped back in fear. He seemed very angry.

“Miss Hanta and Miss Toyota here believe that it must’ve been one of you who wrote the note,” the crew member answered.

As it turned out, the man-hunter’s name was Hanta. That must’ve been how she’d gotten that nickname. And Toyota was the name of her friend.

“One of us?” Holmes asked. We all blinked in surprise.

“Yes, when Miss Hanta and Miss Toyota left their room, there was nothing wrong with the door. But when they returned after relaxing in the lounge, they found this paper. You, Miss Mashiro, Mrs. Hirakawa, Mrs. Misawa, and Mr. Kuroishi left the lounge before they did, so...”

“But we weren’t the only ones who left before they did, were we?”

Right, Shiro and Yilin left before us.

“Well, um...they said you were the ones with a motive...” the crew member said hesitantly. “I’m very sorry.” She bowed repeatedly. The women must have pressured her into bringing us here.

“A motive? Setting myself aside, what are the others’ motives?” Holmes asked curiously, looking back and forth between Hanta and the rest of the passengers.

“It started when you called me a cheap product that was being forced onto you, Yagashira,” Hanta said accusingly. “That mother and daughter were nearby at the time, and they laughed at me. So I glared at them and said, ‘Eavesdropping and laughing? That’s scummy.’ Then they rolled their eyes and whispered, ‘Who’s the real scum here?’”

The mother and daughter scoffed at her reasoning.

“And then that old man came up to me with a glass of wine and acted all friendly, saying, ‘Now, now, don’t be so glum. Why don’t you have a drink?’ So I told him, ‘Know your place,’ and he clicked his tongue at me.”

“This is stupid,” Kuroishi spat, heaving a sigh.

“Hmph. But anyway, the most suspicious one is that woman!” Hanta pointed at me.

“Huh?” My jaw dropped. “M-Me?”

“Yes! You didn’t like it that I was talking to him in the lounge, right? It seemed like you were glancing at us and had the nerve to listen in on our conversation. Since you were there, he had no choice but to call me a cheap product that was being forced onto him, and you heard that. So you put this nasty note on my door to tell me to stay away from your companion! How sickening and low! I’ll sue you for defamation!” she declared, crumpling the paper into a ball and throwing it on the floor.

I was lost for words. *She thinks I got mad about what happened in the lounge and put a “Cheap Product’s Room” sign on her door?* “No, I did no such thing.” I shook my head, dumbfounded.

Holmes bent down, picked up the crumpled paper, and slowly unfolded it. “I understand,” he said quietly but sharply.

“Huh?” Everyone froze.

His face showed no expression. He stared down Hanta with a terrifyingly blank look. “Let’s investigate this properly.”

“Investigate?”

Holmes nodded calmly. “First of all, when Aoi and I left the lounge, Hanta, Toyota, Kuroishi, and Misawa were still there. Hirakawa was not. I remember that. So Hirakawa was the first to return to her room. Are we in agreement so far?”

There were gulps all around.

At times like this, he really is the “Holmes of Kyoto.” I only vaguely remember the scene, but he can recall it perfectly as if he has photographic memory. He might forget it soon, but for now, everything must still be stored in his head.

“My mother had a little too much to drink and was feeling unwell, so she went back to our room first,” Misawa confirmed.

Hirakawa nodded. “Yes, I was lying down.”

“After Hirakawa, the next to leave were Aoi and me,” said Holmes. We had left after our talk with Shiro Kikukawa. At the time, Hanta, Toyota, Misawa, and Kuroishi had still been in the lounge. “When we were returning to our room, we

passed by the sixth car. There was nothing wrong with the door at that time.”

“As if that means anything when you’re the most likely culprits,” Hanta scoffed, crossing her arms and giving us a sideways look.

Obviously, we had done no such thing.

“Between Misawa and Kuroishi, which of you left the lounge first?” Holmes asked.

The two looked at each other and tilted their heads.

“I don’t know,” said Misawa. “I wasn’t with him. I was enjoying the atmosphere of the lounge and drinking wine by myself.”

“I was just drinking at the counter and went back to my room when I got tired,” said Kuroishi. “I don’t remember who was there or who left when.”

I nodded in understanding. Not everyone had a perfect memory like Holmes’s.

“But Hanta and Toyota are sure that you left the lounge before they did, right?” Holmes glanced at the two women.

“Yes, since they were rude to me, I couldn’t help but look at them,” Hanta confirmed.

“Did the two of you go back to your room together?”

“Oh, no. I went first.” Toyota raised her hand.

“Why did you go back by yourself?”

“I got a phone call, so I left the lounge to find somewhere quiet to talk. I made my way back to the room while I was on the phone, and when I got to the sixth car, I was startled by that sign. That’s when she arrived.” She looked at Hanta.

Hanta nodded.

“I see.” Holmes turned to the crew member. “Fortunately, we have hard evidence. Could I bother you to bring us something that will show our handwriting? All of the passengers signed in, so you should have that, right?”

“Oh, yes.” The crew member hurried away.

The room was filled with silence and a strange sense of tension.

3

“Thank you for your patience.”

Upon returning to the room, the crew member placed the file on the table.

“Thank you,” Holmes said, instinctively taking his white gloves out of his inner pocket and putting them on. He reached for the file only to be interrupted.

“Um, it contains personal information, so we would appreciate it if you only looked at the name column.” The crew member hid the columns with addresses and other personal information with some sort of thick card paper.

“Yes, I understand. Please show me only the names, then.”

“Right away.” She flipped through the file.

Kiyotaka Yagashira

Holmes’s handwriting was very clean and elegant.

Aoi Mashiro

My handwriting had a roundness to it. I’ve had people tell me it looks girly, so I’ve always wanted to be able to write more beautifully.

Naturally, both of our writing styles were completely different from the “Cheap Product’s Room” sign.

Kazuo Kuroishi

His wasn’t nice, but it wasn’t unreadable. It was a typical adult man’s handwriting.

Fumiko Hirakawa

Takako Misawa

Their handwriting didn’t resemble each other’s much. Hirakawa’s was soft and light, while Misawa’s was more rough and jagged like a man’s.

Next were the two staying in this room.

Eiko Hanta

Hanta's writing was more beautiful than I'd expected. It was completely different from the "Cheap Product's Room" sign.

Yoshiko Toyota

Her handwriting was unique, with long horizontal lines and varying sizes between characters.

At a glance, Misawa's jagged handwriting resembled the sign the most. Everyone's eyes drifted to her as if they had thought the same thing.

"Wait, what? It wasn't me," said Misawa, flustered.

"I understand now," said Holmes, closing the file with a snap.

"Huh?" Everyone looked up at him.

"What do you understand?" asked Hanta, sounding bewildered.

"From the handwriting, I know who wrote this 'Cheap Product's Room' sign," declared Holmes.

"Huh?" The rest of us blinked.

The room fell silent. Holmes picked up the paper again. To the untrained eye, it resembled Misawa's writing, but she didn't seem like the kind of person who would do such a thing just because Hanta glared at her.

Holmes turned to Misawa. The rest of us gulped, thinking, *So it really was her?* But then, he shifted his gaze to the woman next to her. "It was you who wrote this, Hirakawa, wasn't it?"

Misawa's mother widened her eyes in shock.

Hanta seemed surprised too. "Why?" She looked at her friend, Toyota, with imploring eyes.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Hirakawa squeaked. "My handwriting doesn't look anything like that."

"No, it looks completely different at first glance," Holmes agreed.

The sign resembles Misawa's handwriting. Does that mean her mother

imitated it on purpose?

“Then why?” Hirakawa asked.

“Handwriting analysis isn’t about making judgments based on a first glance.”

Hirakawa blinked.

“Your original writing is soft and rounded. In order to hide that, you wrote with extremely jagged letters. When writing in a completely different style from your own, you unconsciously thought of your daughter’s handwriting. That’s why this sign resembles Misawa’s at first.” Holmes compared the “Cheap Product’s Room” sign with Misawa’s handwriting as he spoke. “However, it is not hers. The person who wrote this deliberately tried to make it different from their own handwriting, but the pen pressure, size of each character, and spacing reveal their characteristics. Did you know that when disguising one’s handwriting, it’s important to change letter size and spacing in addition to the character shapes themselves?”

He held the paper up as he continued, “While I’m at it, let me tell you some more about handwriting analysis. First, we examine the pen strokes in detail: the shape and length of each one, the way they stop, and the way they change direction. The second thing we look at is pressure. We identify where the writer puts strength into the pen and where they relax. Third, we look for things that are out of place, such as shaky lines, bits added after the fact, and unnatural stops. Fourth, we compare stroke orders and determine if they are the same. Fifth, we check how the characters are arranged: their size, positioning, and spacing. Examining handwriting this way reveals the writer’s quirks, which are impossible to conceal no matter how differently they try to write. That said, I’m not an expert on handwriting, so my opinion is not proof. However, if we ask a professional to analyze it, I’m sure the answer will immediately be clear.” He smiled, but the look in his eyes was even sharper than before.

“Mom, how could you?” Misawa widened her eyes in disbelief.

Hirakawa hurriedly leaned forward and said, “N-No! I only did it because that girl asked me to.” She pointed at Toyota.

Toyota gasped and looked away sheepishly.

“I didn’t leave the lounge early because I drank too much,” Hirakawa continued. “Listening to Hanta and Toyota’s conversation put me in a sour mood. Hanta was constantly bragging and bad-mouthing others, while Toyota was just praising her the whole time. I felt sorry for Toyota, but I didn’t want to listen to that anymore, so I went back to my room.” She sighed. “As I was resting, I suddenly felt like it was a waste to be spending time in my room, so I decided to go back to the lounge. On the way, I ran into Toyota and we had a little chat. She said her father worked for Hanta’s company, so she couldn’t go against her. But she couldn’t take it anymore, and she wanted to give her egotistical friend a small taste of her own medicine, so she asked me to help her. She said using her own handwriting would make it obvious it was her. I wasn’t fond of Hanta either, and I couldn’t stand how rude she had been to my husband’s savior, so I went along with it. She was saying a lot of bad things about Yagashira and Mashiro in the lounge.” She looked down.

“Your husband’s savior?” Holmes tilted his head.

“The man who collapsed this afternoon was Mrs. Hirakawa’s husband,” the crew member replied.

“Ah, I see.”

“He’s resting in the hospital now, but he’s made a full recovery,” said Hirakawa. “Thank you so much. I’m sorry it took me so long to say that.” She and Misawa bowed deeply to Holmes.

“It’s fine. I’m glad the situation wasn’t worse,” said Holmes.

“Yes. He told me to not worry about him and enjoy the rest of the 7 Stars trip with our daughter, but I ended up causing such a fuss...” Hirakawa hung her head, tears in her eyes.

“I can’t believe this,” said Hanta, placing a hand over her mouth. She must’ve been shocked to find out that the note had been her friend’s idea all along. Toyota said nothing, biting her lip and looking down. Hanta whirled around and exclaimed, “How could you do this, Yoshiko?! You’re horrible!”

Suddenly, Toyota looked back up. “Who’s ‘horrible’?! I did it because you told me to!” she snapped as if letting out everything that she’d been bottling up inside until then.

“Huh?” We blinked.

“What do you mean by that?” Kuroishi tilted his head.

“You told me you wanted to teach your friend a lesson,” said Hirakawa, confused.

Toyota clenched her fists. “It wasn’t true. Hanta asked me to put that note on the door so she could yell at the people who were rude to her and incriminate that girl.”

By “that girl,” she obviously meant me.

Holmes’s eyebrow twitched.

“I tried to do as I was told, but my writing is pretty distinctive, so I thought it’d be too obvious it was me,” Toyota continued. “I wasn’t sure what to do, but then Hirakawa came by. She said, ‘You must have it tough,’ and I took the opportunity to have her write it. It was all staged by Hanta.”

“Y-You’re lying!” Hanta exclaimed. “You’re blaming me because you’re scared of them suing you, aren’t you?!”

“You’re still going to play dumb? I’m sick of dealing with you. Why does it matter that my dad works for your parents’ company? Now that I think about it, it doesn’t have anything to do with me!”

“What? You’ve got a lot of nerve! Who do you think your family owes their livelihood to?! You were mad at me, so you put this rude sign on my door, and now you’re trying to frame me as the culprit, aren’t you?!”

“Hanta, Toyota...” Panicking, the rest of us tried to calm them down before it turned into a physical altercation.

Who’s telling the truth? Did Hanta tell Toyota to do it or was it Toyota’s own decision? Both seem possible.

Holmes crossed his arms and gave an exasperated sigh. “Can we cut it out with the bad acting?” His gaze was directed at Hanta.

“What?” Hanta gave a strained smile.

“When I was talking to you before dinner, you were alone at the bar counter.

Toyota was not in the lounge yet.”

Right, Hanta had been alone when she was trying to get closer to Holmes.

“To begin with, I never once said the words ‘cheap product’ to you.”

“Huh?” Hanta blinked.

“I said to you, ‘When someone is giving you the hard sell, it’s rarely for anything good.’ Your outrage is because you interpreted that as, ‘He called me a cheap product!’ In other words, the phrase ‘cheap product’ was a figment of your imagination. Therefore, if Toyota was going to put a sign on your door, she wouldn’t have written ‘Cheap Product’s Room.’ Even if you had complained to her about what I said, she wouldn’t choose a phrase that had only been disclosed to her. Hanta, you wanted to take out your frustration on us, so you came up with this crass plan and asked your friend—no, I suppose you think of her as a servant. You *ordered* Toyota to carry it out, didn’t you?” Holmes’s face turned expressionless.

The room grew colder and colder, and I felt a chill run down my spine. No one moved a millimeter. They were all overwhelmed by Holmes.

“What did you say to my girlfriend earlier?” he continued. “That she was ‘sickening and low’? You’ll sue her for defamation?” He chuckled, approached her, and stared into her eyes. “How ironic,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

“Oh, no, um...” She was visibly shaking.

He really is intimidating. Just watching them is making me shiver. Hanta must be scared, having Holmes’s hatred directly aimed at her. I know because I had the same done to me by Ensho before. When we were sitting on the bench in the park and he said, “I wonder what face he’ll make if I defile you”... Just imagining his twisted sneer makes me tremble in fear.

“Holmes, you can stop now,” I said, unconsciously grabbing his arm.

“Aoi...” His eyes were still cold when he turned around, but as soon as they met mine, his expression softened and became somewhat bewildered.

“I don’t know about everyone else, but I’m okay with dropping it here,” I told

him. "This is supposed to be a fun trip, isn't it?"

The others looked at each other, wondering what to do.

Holmes's brow remained furrowed. "But she was trying to frame you for something you didn't do. If it were me being harassed, I'd hold back, but not when it's you. I need to show people what happens when they hurt someone I love," he insisted.

I was really happy that he cared about me, but... "It's okay. I appreciate your feelings, but if you keep doing this...I'm not going to enjoy it," I said, squeezing his shirt. He froze. "So I want to end this here. Let's throw out that paper and go back to our fun trip. It's not every day we get to go on the 7 Stars." I clapped my hands together and smiled.

After a pause, Holmes let out a deep sigh and shrugged. "If you insist."

He then turned back to Hanta with his cold eyes. The woman was trembling so much that she was practically bouncing. Her eyes were still wide open, and she didn't seem capable of speaking.

"I'm reluctant to drop it, but for her sake, I won't say anything more," Holmes said, ripping up the offending paper and letting the pieces scatter across the floor.

Even under these circumstances, he'll still get as much revenge as he can. He really is blackhearted.

"I have no desire to be here anymore, so we'll be returning to our room," he announced. "I hope you learn from this and move on from selling 'cheap products.' Now then, please excuse us." He put his arm around my shoulder, nodded to the other passengers, and quickly left the car with me.

"Mr. Yagashira," said the crew member, who had hurried after us. "We're truly sorry for the trouble. Not only did you help one of our passengers in the afternoon, but you got involved in this incident too." She bowed deeply.

"Please don't blame yourself. I'm sure she must've been disturbing the other guests with the noise she was making when she demanded you bring us here."

"Still, we can't apologize enough," the crew member insisted, keeping her

head lowered. "If there's anything we can do for you, please let us know."

"Oh, in that case, may I ask for a favor?"

"Y-Yes."

"I'd like you to send the roll cake we had today to Kyoto. I'll pay for it, of course. It was very delicious, and I'd like my girlfriend's family to try it." Holmes placed a hand on his chest and smiled.

"Holmes..."

I couldn't believe he'd say that. I felt kind of warm and fuzzy inside. *But what about the owner and manager?*

"I'm sorry. That roll cake's best-by date was today." The crew member bowed again, looking even more apologetic.

"Oh, I see." Holmes slumped his shoulders, seeming truly disappointed. I couldn't help but giggle.

4

After returning to our room, we took turns showering and changed into our sleepwear. Neither of us was wearing pajamas, though, just t-shirts and shorts.

"That was kind of hectic," I said.

"Well, on the bright side, they interrupted what we were doing," Holmes said, taking a drink of water.

"Huh? Why is that a good thing?"

"I lost control of myself there. In my head, I was yelling at myself to hit the brakes."

"Oh. So you weren't mad about being interrupted?"

"Actually, I was very mad. Interrupting someone's love life out of selfishness is inexcusable," he said nonchalantly, holding up a hand.

That's Holmes for you.

"That said, you looked truly adorable when you were slightly struggling

beneath me. It was a blissful moment for me. Thank you very much,” he said with a bow, making me choke. “You must be tired. Shall we lie down? Which one do you want?” he asked, looking at the two beds.

“I’m fine with either. I’ll take this one.” I sat down on the bed to the left since it happened to be closer.

Holmes turned off the lights, leaving the room softly illuminated by indirect lighting. “We’ll finally be at the hotel in Kirishima tomorrow,” he said, lying down on the right-side bed.

“Yes.”

I haven’t been thinking about it because of everything that’s been happening, but...tomorrow is the big day. Holmes is always there to protect me. He cares about me so much, but he might disappear from my side. My chest ached. I felt like I was going to cry, so I pretended to yawn to hide it.

“You must be tired. Let’s go to sleep.”

“Okay.” I lifted the blanket over my head.

“You really are kind, Aoi,” he murmured.

I peeked out from under the blanket and shook my head. “No, it’s not like that.”

“It’s not?” Holmes turned sideways to face me, leaning on his elbow.

“Thanks to your teaching, I’ve come to want to see as many beautiful things and as many things I like as possible. If I’m spending money, I want to spend it on things that make me happy, even if I have to push myself to do it sometimes. The same goes for time. Time is really precious. I want to spend my limited time on things I enjoy. When bad things happen, I don’t want to drag them out. So it’s not that I stopped you out of kindness. In your words, it was ‘for my own sake.’” I giggled.

“Aoi...” He reached his hand out. I did the same, grasping his in mine. “You really are an amazing person.”

“No, that’s definitely not true. You’re always overestimating me. I’m extremely normal.”

“I’m normal too.”

“You’re not normal at all.”

“No, I’m an upstanding citizen of Kyoto.”

“Speaking of upstanding... You went too far, ripping up that note and scattering the pieces all over the room.”

“What do you mean? You should be praising me for stopping at just that,” he huffed, turning his face away.

“Jeez.” I forced a smile.

Holmes closed his eyes, seeming ashamed. “Sorry. I have a terrible personality, don’t I? Guys like me probably weren’t your type before, right?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. *Were they?* “It’s true that I didn’t like the kind of person who’d have the best grades in the class while being blackhearted on the inside.”

He coughed. “You’re as harsh as ever.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“What kind of guy was your type?”

I didn’t know how to answer that either. *What was my type? My ex-boyfriend asked me out when we were still in middle school. I said yes because I was moved that he’d confessed to me in front of the whole class, but I honestly don’t know if he was my type.*

“Umm, why are you asking that?”

Holmes is definitely the type of person who wouldn’t want to hear about my past relationships.

He gently squeezed my hand. “Because I *do* want you to like me despite how I am,” he murmured quietly.

I felt my heart clench. I didn’t know if it was natural or calculated, but he always pierced my heart so easily.

“I think tomorrow, we should...” He stopped there because he knew what the next words were going to be: “call it off,” most likely. He was afraid of losing

these feelings. But at the same time, we had come this far for a reason, so he stopped himself from finishing the sentence.

After a brief silence, I heard him breathing softly. It seemed he had fallen asleep. Before I knew it, I was drifting off to the comfortable rocking of the train too.

5

In my half-asleep, half-awake state, I could vaguely tell that the room was growing brighter.

“Aoi. Aoi.” Holmes gently shook my body.

“Huh?” I opened my eyes a sliver and saw an unfamiliar ceiling and Holmes’s face. “Ah!” That immediately woke me up. “Holmes...”

“Sorry, I know it’s still early, but the sun will be rising soon.”

Outside the window, I could see the dark blue ocean under a whitish sky. “Oh, it’s the ocean!” I quickly sat up the moment I saw the vast blue horizon behind the greenery.

“Yes, it’s the Nichinan Coastline.”

We both got out of bed and stood in front of the large window at the back of the train.

“The sky is getting brighter and brighter,” I remarked. “The sun really is rising, huh?”

“Yes, that area is the Hyuga Sea. I’m sure the sunrise is beautiful when the weather is clear like today,” he explained, pointing at the horizon.

Nichinan Coastline, Hyuga Sea... I’m not familiar with those names, but they must be famous places.

“It’s not every day you get to see the sun rise over the ocean from a train window, so I had to wake you up even though it looked like you were sleeping comfortably. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I shook my head. “I’m glad you did. This really is a rare sight, isn’t

it? Also, I love the ocean. I get excited when I see it.”

“Oh, that’s right. Saitama Prefecture is landlocked.”

“Yeah. I’m a landlocked Saitama citizen.”

“I know how you feel. Kyoto Prefecture does reach the ocean, but the city itself isn’t anywhere near it, so I also get a little excited when I see it. I dislike my pale complexion, though, so I’m not interested in playing on the beach.” He chuckled.

It grew brighter and brighter. I could feel the clouds, sky, and air moving. Sunrises and sunsets made me realize that the Earth really was rotating. Before long, the horizon flashed brightly, and the sun appeared.

“Wow!” I exclaimed without thinking. The colors of the sky and sea suddenly became brighter. Everything was shining. *It’s so beautiful.* Before I knew it, I was shedding tears. *Oh no, I can’t believe I’m crying at the scenery.*

Holmes kindly offered me his handkerchief. As usual, he was so considerate that it made me feel embarrassed. I gave him a small nod, took the handkerchief, and pressed it against the inner corners of my eyes.

He gently placed a hand on my back. “Happy birthday, Aoi,” he said, giving me a light kiss on the forehead.

“Thank you.”

It was May 3rd. I was now twenty years old.

6

After that, we went to the dining car for breakfast and returned to our room. There had been no sign of Shiro Kikukawa, Yilin Jing, Hanta, or Toyota in the dining car. Hanta and Toyota were probably too ashamed to face Holmes. I wasn’t concerned about Shiro, but I wondered if Yilin was all right.

The train would soon be arriving at Miyazaki Station. Just like yesterday at Yufuin, there were two options: sightseeing on a bus or staying on the train. Since our trip was centered around enjoying the train to its fullest, we weren’t going to take any of the bus tours.

“Sorry, Aoi, I’m going to take a nap,” Holmes said once we arrived at our room. “Feel free to spend the time however you like. If you want to go on the bus tour, I’ll ask them to switch your option.”

I shook my head, surprised. “No, it’s okay. I’ll take the time to relax too. Are you tired, Holmes?”

“Yes, I didn’t get much sleep.” He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Huh? I thought you were fast asleep.”

“Sorry, I was only pretending to sleep. I thought that if I didn’t sleep, you might not be able to either. Then you turned to face me, and I was just too nervous to even think about sleeping. Oh, but I enjoyed it very much, so please don’t worry.”

“Uh...”

“Well then, good night.” He lay down on the bed.

“Oh, good night.”

I felt kind of bad that Holmes had been awake the whole time I was sound asleep. Almost as soon as he lay down, I heard his soft sleeping breaths again. This time, he probably wasn’t faking it.

I got onto my own bed, sat down against the wall, and took out my phone. *Huh?* Since it was in silent mode, I hadn’t noticed that my mom had messaged me.

“Are you enjoying your trip? I’m sure you’re fine since you’re with Kiyotaka, but it’s hard not to be a little worried when you haven’t contacted us at all. Where did you end up going?”

Crap. I haven’t messaged my parents. I glanced at Holmes. After confirming that he seemed to be sleeping soundly, I silently opened the door, stepped out into the empty corridor, and called my mom. She picked up after a few rings.

“Hello, Aoi?” There was a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Sorry for not contacting you. I just realized now,” I said, laughing to ease the tension.

She gave a sigh of relief. “Well, you must’ve been enjoying your trip so much that you forgot to call.”

“Yeah, it’s been a lot of fun.” *Although a lot happened...*

“Oh, right, happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“So, where are you now?”

“Uh...Miyazaki, Kyushu?”

“Why do you sound unsure?”

“We’re in transit right now, on the 7 Stars sightseeing train,” I said hesitantly.

“Huh?” She clearly tensed up—not that I blamed her. This was the person who had been fascinated by the 7 Stars TV special, calling it “a whole different world.” “The 7 Stars...you mean *that* 7 Stars?”

“Y-Yes.”

“The one that was on TV?”

“Yeah.”

“I see,” she said quietly. Then she took a deep breath. “Aoi.”

I unconsciously straightened my posture at her sudden strong tone of voice. “Wh-What?”

What’s she going to say? “You’re not ready for that place yet”? “I want to go too”? I anxiously awaited her next words.

“Make sure you cherish Kiyotaka,” she said in an even firmer tone.

“Huh?”

“Think about it carefully. Kiyotaka is a wonderful person—the kind of person who would give you a trip on the 7 Stars for your twentieth birthday. I’m not saying this because he’s rich. What I mean is, you won’t find anyone else who would do that even if they had the money. Young people often make mistakes, so don’t let the foolishness of youth make you lose sight of him. Don’t let go of him,” she said as if trying to convince me.

I coughed. "Jeez, what's all this about? Anyway, I'm hanging up." Embarrassed, I forcefully ended the call. "'Don't let go of him,' she says..." *I don't want to, but I don't know what'll happen,* I muttered in my mind as I returned to our room.

The train continued at its rapid pace, and before long, the Kirishima mountain range came into view on the right. "Wow," I murmured. It was so beautiful and divine, just like Mount Yufu had been.

Holmes was still fast asleep. His sleeping face was like a child's, so defenseless that I couldn't help but smile. He always seemed focused, but perhaps he was able to take off that armor in his dreams.

At first, I had admired him for his beautiful appearance and elegant mannerisms. He had often made my heart race, but it wasn't out of love. It was more like idolizing someone on TV who was out of my reach.

Now that I think about it, when did my feelings change into love? When we first met, I'd thought he was like a cyborg. He was gentlemanly at all times, knew everything, and was always right. The first time I felt his human side was when we went to the handicraft market at Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple together. There, he confided in me that he'd once had his girlfriend taken from him by another man. *"I was so shocked, envious, and frustrated that I considered going to Mount Kurama and taking up priesthood."* It was the kind of bitter memory you wouldn't want to reveal, and yet he'd told me about it without shame. Not only had this seemingly perfect man gone through such a thing, but he had spoken honestly about it. That was what had made him feel human to me. Maybe that was when I started feeling attracted to him...

"Oh, I know," I unconsciously said aloud.

I figured out what I like about Holmes. I think it's because he's honest with me. He shows me his uncool side, his blackheartedness, and his faults. Since he shows me everything, I can feel at ease. I'm sure it was the same with Katsumi back then. I was moved by his honest, straightforward expression of his feelings for me. Holmes even revealed his inner struggle to me. It was painful, but I think I'm still happy that he did.

At 2:30 p.m., the train arrived at Hayato Station. It was finally time to move to our hotel. The bus taking us there had the same ancient lacquer color and gold emblem as the 7 Stars. It was polished to a shine and felt extremely high-class. Inside, there was a center aisle with two-seat rows on either side. Even though the layout was no different from normal tour buses, it seemed very spacious for some reason. I felt nervous and strangely exalted as I boarded the bus with the other passengers.

As it turned out, the deluxe suite passengers in the seventh car stayed in different accommodations than those in the normal rooms. Since we were in a deluxe suite, we'd be staying at Tenku no Shima—Island in the Sky—a resort thirteen times the size of Tokyo Dome. It had five villas of which only three were for lodging, making it a very luxurious private resort surrounded by nature.

I gave an impressed hum as I listened to the explanation on the bus. I thought hearing about the place beforehand would prepare me for it, but when we actually arrived at Tenku no Shima, I was stunned. A single villa standing on a hill, surrounded by the great outdoors—there was nothing man-made around it as far as the eye could see. The villa and terrace were both made of wood, giving them a natural look, but at the same time, they were exquisitely designed.

The woody living room had a pure white sofa, while the bedroom had two large white double beds. Windows took up most of the walls, flooding the interior with natural light. In the middle of the wide terrace was a large, rectangular, wooden framed open-air bath. The white parasol in the center stood out against the blue sky. Holmes and I had this whole space to ourselves—the villa, the bath, the hill, and even the scenery around us.

“No wonder they call it the Island in the Sky,” said Holmes, stepping out onto the terrace and stretching with a pleased smile. “It feels like we’ve come to a desert island. At this private resort, everything we see is our own space. We won’t run into any other guests.”

“Um, this is a really impressive hotel, isn’t it?”

“Yes, some call it the best hot spring resort in Japan. The owner designed everything from the building to the scenery, and he even cleared the forest himself with a bulldozer. The trees he cut down were used to build the villa, and the wood gives it a lovely warmth. All of the meals are made with organic vegetables grown here. Kagoshima’s clean air, a vast sky, beautiful nature as far as the eye can see, and fresh ingredients. It feels like we’re being taught the true meaning of luxury. I’ve always wanted to come here, so I’m really glad,” he said passionately, placing a hand on his chest.

“I-I see.”

The birds flying in the sky were chirping. The air was clear and the early summer breeze felt nice. Warm steam was rising from the open-air bath. It was luxurious, but I didn’t think I’d be able to relax in a bath under the bright sky.

I entered the villa and found a tiny cake on the table with a chocolate plaque that said, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY AOI.”

“Once again, happy birthday, Aoi,” said Holmes, spreading his arms with a wide smile on his face.

I almost cried. “Thank you. Did you order this?”

“Yes, although it’s small because it’s only for two people.”

“No, I’m glad. It’s just the right size.”

We prepared tea. Holmes put a candle in the shape of the number “20” on the cake and lit it. I blew out the candle in a single breath and smiled, embarrassed, as he clapped and said, “Happy birthday,” like one would at a child’s party.

8

After eating the cake, we went for a walk in the forest, holding hands. The ground was grassy, the trees swayed in the wind, and we could hear the sounds of birds and the ocean. It truly did feel like an uninhabited island.

Then again, a real uninhabited island wouldn’t be this beautiful. Maybe this really is an “island in the sky.” Three years ago, I entered the antique store Kura

and met Holmes for the first time. Being here with him now feels like a dream.

“What are you thinking about?” Holmes asked curiously, probably in response to the smile on my face.

“I just remembered when we first met.”

“Oh, that brings back memories.”

“What was your first impression of me, Holmes?”

“Well...I thought, ‘A suspicious high school girl came into the shop.’”

“You were exactly right,” I said with a wry smile.

“But I also thought you were a considerate girl. You were watching the store and making sure you wouldn’t be interrupting anyone. When you awkwardly went further into the store, unable to ask for an appraisal, I decided to throw you a lifeline.”

Oh, so that’s why he started talking to me.

“Most people who aren’t knowledgeable about antiques pass by the Shino tea bowl without paying it any mind. Even if they do look at it, it’s only for a few seconds. You were the first high schooler who ever stopped in front of it and stared at it despite knowing nothing about it. I found it very impressive how you looked at it as if enraptured. Then, when I examined what you’d brought in, I was convinced that you had an eye for art. I thought if I showed and taught you about various things, your hidden talent might blossom. After that, you broke down in tears, didn’t you?”

“Ahhh, don’t bring that up anymore.” Every time I remembered that, I felt like running away.

Holmes chuckled. “Your honesty was dazzling to my jaded eyes. Most of all, since I’d been heartbroken for a similar reason, I felt a sort of connection with you, although it wasn’t love at the time. I wanted to help you.” He smiled. “It really is nostalgic.”

After walking around the forest, we returned to the villa. Holmes let go of my hand and stretched with a grunt. We both took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. The birds looked like they were playing as they flapped their wings.

“Have you heard that romantic feelings typically only last two years?” he asked out of the blue.

“Yes, I have,” I replied, startled. “I don’t know why, though,” I quietly added.

“When people fall in love, they undergo a surge in oxytocin—the ‘love hormone,’ dopamine, and the sex hormones, estrogen and testosterone. However, this is only a temporary effect. After two years, they drop back to normal levels.”

I nodded silently.

“When I heard about this, I thought, ‘That’s how people are.’ Even if you’re in love with someone for a while, after two years, you’ll lose interest. After ten years, you might not even feel sexual desire for the same person. I thought that for those who stay married for a long time, sex must be a form of communication rather than something done out of desire.”

As I listened to him, I thought about my own parents. They had married out of love, but nowadays, there wasn’t any romantic mood between them. *Maybe it really is true.*

“However, now that I’m in love with you, I can’t imagine such a time coming,” he continued. “I can’t believe that this urge I have to hold you right now will ever disappear.”

I stared at him, unable to say anything.

“But I’m sure everyone feels this way when they fall in love. They believe that this elated feeling will last forever.” He chuckled.

What is he getting at? After two years, passion fades. Maybe he’s trying to tell me to be prepared for the fact that my feelings will probably disappear too. It was painful to think about.

“I told you about my nature before. I can’t believe it now, but it’s possible that, like a couple’s fading passion, my yearning for you will one day disappear

like a light snowfall.”

My heart ached at those words.

Holmes grasped my hand again, pulled it closer to him, and looked me straight in the eye. “But...even if that really does happen, I still want you to be with me. Even if all these sweet feelings of love, desire, and passion disappear, I still want you by my side.”

I looked back at him, not averting my gaze.

“So, Aoi...”

“Yes?”

“I know it’s not possible right now, but will you marry me?”

“Huh?”

“I want to walk through life with you, not anyone else. I want you to be my life partner.”

My breath caught in my throat. He was saying that even if his feelings changed—if he lost all of his feelings of love, desire, and passion—he would still want me by his side. It sounded a little reckless, but it was the best thing he could’ve said.

Holmes... “Yes, thank you.” I nodded firmly as I wiped my tears.

“Thank you. Hold out your hand for me.”

I held out my right hand.

“This one,” he said, taking my left. “It’s your birthstone, for your birthday.” He slipped a ring onto my left ring finger. A sparkling yellow-green emerald was set into the platinum band. The gem was in the shape of a flower, just like the necklace he’d given me before.

“Thank you.” I was too surprised and touched to say anything more.

“Shall we go, then?” He held my hand again, but this time his own was trembling.

I looked up at him in surprise.

He smiled weakly and said, “Sorry, I’m actually really nervous.”

“Huh?”

“It’s to the point where my hands are shaking like this. I highly doubt I’ll be able to perform well tonight, but please be patient with me. I’m sure I’ll be able to make up for my incompetence one day.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!” I coughed and looked down in embarrassment, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry, even though I’m a grown adult, I have zero confidence. I’m not cool at all,” he said with a chuckle.

“That’s not true.” I shook my head.

Right, this is what I love about Holmes.

He gently led me by the hand as he began to walk. The pure white villa on the hill was illuminated by the orange sunset. I squinted at the brightness, feeling like we were walking through a scene in a picture book.

I’ll surely remember this image for the rest of my life.

“Aoi.” Holmes turned around and hugged me.

My beloved, reflected in my eyes.

“I love you,” he whispered in my ear. I felt my body tremble.

“I love you too. As long as I have you, I don’t need anything else.” Those were my honest feelings.

It’s true. As long as I have you, I don’t want anything else.

The setting sun cast long shadows. Our own shadows came closer, and at last, became one.

Short Story: The Melancholy of Kaori Miyashita

Going back in time a little to April 21st...

The door chime rang behind me as I, Kaori Miyashita, left the antique store Kura. As soon as I stepped outside, I was overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the shopping street. Kura's door felt like a portal between different worlds.

"I guess I'll go watch a movie," I said, taking my phone out of my bag to check the time. It had been on silent mode, so I hadn't noticed that I'd missed a call.

Keigo Kohinata

I squinted at the name on the screen. I'd received texts from him before, but never a phone call. *Did something happen?*

I called him back, feeling strangely concerned. After a few rings, he picked up.

"Kaori?" He sounded surprised.

Why is he surprised when he's the one who called me first? Was it an accident?

"Sorry, I'm calling because I had a missed call from you," I replied. "Did you call the wrong person by accident? If so, don't worry about it." I reached for the "end call" button.

"No, no, I did call you," he said, sounding flustered. "It was on purpose."

"Why did you sound surprised, then?"

"Because I was. I thought you intentionally didn't pick up the phone. Even if you were in a situation where you couldn't, I figured you'd continue ignoring it."

"Huh? I'm not that mean." I laughed a little. *Good, I can still laugh.* "So what did you need from me?"

"I was wondering if today was your birthday."

"Huh?"

"Your email address has '0421' in it."

“Oh, yes. You’re just like Holmes, huh?”

“No, this is way more obvious than the things he figures out.” Kohinata laughed. “Happy birthday, Kaori. I was calling to ask if you wanted to have lunch with me.”

I blinked.

“But you didn’t pick up, so I got a little depressed, thinking you were spending time with the person you said you liked.” He spoke casually, but I could tell he was expressing his true feelings.

Kohinata is so unfair. How is my heart supposed to not waver when he says something like that at a time like this? The tears I’d been holding back spilled from my eyes.

“Kaori,” he said in a serious tone, perhaps realizing that I was crying. “Did something happen?”

“I tried to be brave...but it didn’t work.” My voice was surely muffled by tears. Saying it out loud made me realize I’d had my heart broken, and the reality of it made my chest ache.

“Where are you right now?”

“Near the Sanjo movie theater...”

“Wait for me at the cafe we went to last time.” He hung up.

I stared at my phone, bewildered. “Wait for him at the cafe?” I wiped my tears and headed to the cafe we had gone to a while back.

The far end of the upstairs seating area was empty, so I sat there to calm myself, hiding from the other customers. Outside the window, I could see many tourists walking around on the street below. I gazed at them absentmindedly.

How long did I spend doing that? Long enough for my latte to go cold, apparently.

“Kaori.” Kohinata appeared in front of me. I nodded weakly at him. He placed his coffee on the table and sat down slowly as if trying to catch his breath.

We faced each other in silence for a moment. He seemed to be hesitating.

"It's okay, just say it," I told him with a strained smile.

He made up his mind and looked me in the eye. "Is the person you like...Yagashira?"

He's probably talking about Holmes. I widened my eyes for a second before giggling. "No."

He looked at me with dubious eyes. "Really?"

"Wait, why do you think I like Holmes?" *I don't even feel comfortable around the guy.*

"When we went to see a movie together, you were glancing at Yagashira's shop. You also seem to have a painful crush, so I thought you might've fallen for the same person as your best friend..."

"Oh, I see." I nodded. "It isn't him. I think Holmes is a great guy, but I'm scared of him." I shrugged.

Kohinata looked surprised.

"I fell in love with someone my father's age," I continued. "His wife passed away at an early age, though." I smiled self-deprecatingly and sipped my latte.

Kohinata stared wide-eyed at me. Apparently he hadn't been expecting that answer.

"Is it that surprising?" I asked.

"No, well, yes." Unable to hide his distress, he awkwardly took a gulp of his coffee. "Ow, that's hot!" He placed a hand over his mouth.

"A-Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But what about you?"

"Huh?"

"Are you okay?" He gave me a worried look.

I averted my eyes. "I turned twenty today, which makes me a proper adult too. Even if our ages are far apart, I thought it'd be acceptable for me to at least

confess to him now, so I went to him.” I stared at the cup in my hands and sighed.

*

The door chime rang as I entered the store. As usual, I was greeted by an antique interior.

“Welcome,” said the manager, who had been quietly working on his manuscript behind the counter. He looked up and smiled gently upon seeing me. “Oh, hello, Kaori.”

“Hello, Manager. I was going to see a movie, but I arrived a bit too early.” Making excuses was a habit of mine.

“I see. Please have a seat. I’ll make coffee.”

“Oh, no need.” I sat in front of the counter.

The manager leisurely went into the kitchenette anyway. Soon, the store was filled with the scent of coffee. I smiled fondly.

“Thank you for waiting,” he said, placing a cup in front of me with a *clunk*.

“No, I should be thanking you.” I bowed and sipped the coffee. There was nothing different about our actions today, but I was so nervous that I couldn’t even taste it.

I’m going to tell him that I love him. Will he take my confession seriously?

“Um...” I began.

The manager, who was already back to working on his manuscript, looked up. “Hm?”

“Umm, it’s about a friend of mine...” I couldn’t help but laugh inwardly at myself. *I hate being told things in a roundabout way, and I also hate doing it myself. But here I am, doing it right now.*

“Did your friend ask you for advice?” He stopped writing and looked at me with worried eyes.

He might think the friend I’m talking about is Aoi. I envied her a little for having the manager’s attention. Then again, she only achieved that by gaining

Holmes's favor and becoming his girlfriend, which is probably harder than winning the lottery.

"My friend fell in love with a man who's the same age as her father," I said.

"Oh?" He seemed relieved that it wasn't Aoi. "Does your friend have a father complex?" he asked gently.

I tilted my head. *Do I?* "No, she doesn't. She actually doesn't even interact with her father much. She does seem to like her uncle who lives far away, though."

"I see." He nodded. "Has she ever had a boyfriend before?"

"I...don't think so."

"She might be scared, then," he muttered in a serious tone.

For some reason, that startled me. "Scared?"

"People who are afraid of real love sometimes develop romantic feelings for two-dimensional characters, idols, or people much older than they are. Perhaps a better way to phrase it would be 'people who will never hurt them.'"

I flinched. He described me perfectly. I did genuinely like two-dimensional characters and idols, but part of the reason for my obsession was that I was avoiding falling in love in real life.

I had an idea as to why. Back when I was in elementary school, I'd developed a crush on a boy in my class. Unable to keep my feelings hidden, I had put my heart into writing a letter and given it to him. The next day, for some unknown reason, I found the letter on the blackboard. I didn't know if the boy had put it there or if he'd shown it to his friends and they had put it there, but at any rate, the whole class was sneering at me. I had silently taken down the letter, called everyone jerks, ripped it up, and thrown it away. The only ones at fault were those boys, but because of that incident, I had hated all men for quite a long time. It made me feel like falling in love with someone could turn me into a laughingstock. If anyone asked me out, I automatically assumed they were making fun of me. In that sense, the manager, who had a similar vibe to my beloved uncle, could indeed be considered "a man who would never hurt me."

“But she truly loves him,” I added.

The manager nodded. “Of course she does. I was only explaining that tendency. I didn’t mean to deny her feelings.”

Relieved, I clenched my fists under the counter. “The person she loves is a lot like you. He lost his wife at an early age...”

“I see.”

“My friend is afraid that she might make him uncomfortable by confessing her feelings...”

“He’ll be taken aback, but I’m sure he’ll be happy.” The manager chuckled.

“Does that go for you too?”

“Me?”

“If a girl younger than your own child confessed that to you, would you feel uncomfortable?” I asked resolutely, looking him in the eye.

“I wouldn’t. I’d be happy, but more than that, I would feel sorry for her.” He looked down weakly.

“You’d feel sorry?”

“Yes, because I wouldn’t be able to accept her,” he said flatly.

I trembled. “Why not? Because she’s too young?”

“Oh, no, age isn’t the issue. Well, in a way, I suppose it is. If she were someone like me, who lost her spouse and would remain in love with him forever, then perhaps it could work out.”

I frowned, not understanding what he was saying.

“In the past, Ueda—a friend of mine—said to me, ‘A woman is only happy when she’s number one in the heart of the man she loves, and a man is only happy when he’s united with his number one woman.’”

“I think I get what you mean.”

“The woman I love the most is my late wife, and that won’t change for the rest of my life. If a young lady were to fall in love with me, I would be honored,

but I would never be able to think of her as my number one, and I wouldn't have the heart to accept her feelings under the condition that she'd be second place." He smiled weakly.

I see, I tried to reply, but my voice died in my throat. Huh, I got rejected before I even confessed. Did the manager notice my feelings and say that to discourage me? Either way, my heartbreak is guaranteed.

"That was really helpful," I said. "I'll tell my friend what you said." I smiled and downed my coffee in one gulp.

"No, I'm sure it doesn't mean much coming from me."

"I'm touched by your feelings for your wife. Thank you."

I bowed deeply and left Kura.

*

That was the story up to when I had called Kohinata. I told him everything but hid the fact that the person I had a crush on was Holmes's father.

Kohinata silently nodded along as I spoke. He had an unusually serious look on his face, as if he didn't know what to say.

"Sorry for forcing my boring story on you," I said.

"Don't be. You did your best," he said gently.

I was moved by his kindness. It had taken several days of contemplation to make up my mind and go to Kura. I wished I could've asked Aoi for advice, but I couldn't because it was Holmes's father I had a crush on. I had done my best without anyone to talk to.

Telling Kohinata everything made me feel liberated, and tears welled up in my eyes. As I looked down and cried, he patted me on the head. For the first time in my life, I thought that a man's hands were unfair. Being caressed by such a large and warm hand made my tears flow even more.

"Your messages have been short lately," he said. "Since you didn't pick up the phone on your birthday, I thought for sure that things were going well with the person you liked, and I was the heartbroken one."

It was true that my messages had been curt. Since I'd been eager to confess to the manager, I hadn't been in the mood to give Kohinata fun responses.

"So on the spur of the moment, I booked a solo trip for myself," he continued.

"Where to?"

"Europe and Egypt."

"Egypt?!" I couldn't help but lean forward.

"Huh? Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just a country I'd like to visit. I want to see the pyramids."

"Oh, same here. I'd been meaning to visit it one day, so I decided to go for it and get over my broken heart...but now what? Should I cancel the trip and hope for another chance with you?" he asked jokingly.

"No, please go."

"Whoa, there's no hope for me?"

After a pause, I replied, "Tell me about your trip when you come back."

His eyes widened. "All right." He grinned happily. His smile made my heart ache ever so slightly.

Kohinata is a really good person. If only I could just fall in love with him instead...

I hated how my feelings hadn't faded—I was still in love with the manager.

"The woman I love the most is my late wife, and that won't change for the rest of my life."

He'd broken my heart with those words, but then he'd won it over again.

"What should I do?" I murmured softly, gazing out the window.

It was April 21st. Today, on my twentieth birthday, a bitter latte seeped into my heart.

Epilogue

The day after our stay at Tenku no Shima, we left the inn at 1:30 p.m. and headed for Hayato Station. The 7 Stars departed from there at 2 p.m. As I watched the scenery roll by, I thought back to what had happened at Tenku no Shima.

Dinner was an assortment of grilled vegetables, roast chicken, vegetable soup, and homemade bread, with plenty of fruit for dessert. The meal wasn't outwardly extravagant, but it still felt like first-rate cooking, made with natural, safe, high-quality ingredients.

Holmes and I toasted with champagne. It was my first time drinking alcohol, and to be honest, I didn't think it tasted very good. But it was moving to think that this was an "adult" flavor. After that, I had a small cup of the sake that Holmes had made. Again, I didn't think it tasted good, but it had a light sweetness that made it easy to drink. I didn't think black coffee tasted good at first either, so maybe I would come to enjoy alcohol one day as well.

Before long, the sky turned dark blue. As the moon and stars were shining silver, a large hand was held out to me. I took it and snuggled into Holmes's chest, and then it was night.

Remembering what happened next made my cheeks burn hot. I felt like steam was going to rise from my head. I shook my head and fast-forwarded my memory to the next morning.

For breakfast, the hotel staff set up a table outside. We ate surrounded by greenery, with the warm spring breeze gently caressing our hair. The meal consisted of delicious organic vegetables, soup, and homemade bread and ham. It was simple, but everything tasted amazing. It really was a moment of sheer bliss.

After that, there was still time before we had to leave, so we relaxed in the villa until then.

“Oh, Aoi, are you sure you want to keep standing? Maybe you should sit down,” Holmes said, coming up to me as I stood in front of the large window at the end of the car.

“I’m fine.”

“Let me know if you don’t feel well. In fact, feel free to lie down. Oh, should I carry you to the bed?”

“I’m really fine.”

“Shall I make you some warm tea, then?” He immediately went to prepare it.

“No, I already had tea earlier. You should get some rest too, Holmes.” I giggled and looked out the window.

I had been afraid that Holmes would change after we spent the night together, but from the look of it, he was still the same for now. If anything, he’d become overly protective.

But how does he really feel?

I gently touched the window. The ring he had given me sparkled on my left hand.

“Aoi.” He hugged me from behind.

“Holmes...”

“You look unhappy, and I’m very concerned. Do you perhaps regret it?” he asked, nervous.

I shook my head. “Not at all.” I had been very happy. The way his hands and shoulders had trembled, the tears he had shed...

“Then why are you making that face?” he asked.

I gathered my resolve, turned around, and looked up at him. “Um, I want to know how you really feel. What happened to your feelings towards me? Be honest.” It didn’t *look* like anything had changed, but since it was Holmes, I was worried that he was hiding his true feelings to be considerate.

He blinked, surprised. “I thought it would be obvious from looking at me. I

can't lie to you, you know?"

"But...I still need you to tell me," I mumbled, looking down.

He chuckled. "I now realize what an arrogant person I was."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to punch my past self for thinking I'd be able to 'obtain' you just by holding you in my arms for a moment."

"Huh?" I tilted my head.

"Now that you've touched me, I'm even more worried than before."

"Worried?"

"Yes. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you." His arms tightened around me.

"Holmes..."

"I'm really glad, though," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. "I was so anxious at the thought you might be regretting it. Even though I'm a grown man, I was on the verge of breaking." He sighed and rested his forehead on my shoulder.

"It was the same for me. I was anxious and at my limit too." I pouted.

He smiled happily. "It's normally only me who's anxious, so I'm glad I was able to do the same to you. But I think I'm going to be even more anxious from here on out."

"Oh, stop that, Holmes."

"Call me by my name when we're alone together, like you did last night."

My heart skipped a beat.

As we were talking, there was a knock at our door. We silently looked at each other, remembering the unpleasant experience we'd had last time.

"Mr. Yagashira, there's a delivery for you," said the crew member outside.

Holmes opened the door. "A delivery?"

"Yes, it's from Miss Jing." The crew member handed him a Boston bag.

Startled, Holmes accepted it. “Thank you. Speaking of which, I haven’t seen her around.”

“She wasn’t feeling well and got off the train.”

“I see.”

“Also, this arrived for Miss Mashiro.” The crew member held out an arrangement of bright red flowers.

“Thank you,” Holmes said hesitantly. He bowed to the crew member and came back to where I was. Putting on his white gloves, he opened the Boston bag. Sure enough, the two hanging scrolls were inside: *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler* and *Mouse*.

We looked at each other with bright smiles.

“Thank goodness. Now we can return them to Yoneyama,” I said, tearing up with joy. *He’ll be able to enter a contest too.*

“Yes, he might be able to win a grand prize.”

And then he might be able to propose to Saori.

“When everything has settled down, I think I’ll ask Yoneyama to give me this *Weeping Cherry and Bush Warbler*. I really like this depiction of us.”

I nodded, tears welling up in my eyes. “What are those flowers?” It was a passionate arrangement of solely red flowers, mostly roses.

“It seems that someone sent you flowers. They must have checked the 7 Stars itinerary and arranged for them to arrive at Hayato Station.”

I looked at the card and was surprised by the name I saw. “Ensho?” We both widened our eyes.

“Happy birthday, Aoi. How was your first time with Mr. Holmes? Let’s have an affair sometime.”

I facepalmed, lost for words. *I can’t believe he’d send me flowers while I’m on the 7 Stars. This has to be his way of harassing Holmes.*

I timidly looked at Holmes, expecting him to be annoyed.

“That’s rather classy of him, sending flowers on your birthday. I’m sure he

arranged this himself. The arrangement is entirely red, yet well-balanced in intensity between the bright red roses and the other flowers. It conveys his good sense,” he said nonchalantly, placing the flowers on the table.

“Um, aren’t you mad at him?”

It was unusual for Holmes to not even flinch when Ensho had sent me self-arranged flowers with such a blatantly instigative message. Normally, he definitely would’ve clicked his tongue.

“Not at all,” he said. “This kind of thing is nothing more than a loser’s last-ditch effort. All said and done, you and I are bound together now. So the most a loser can do is send flowers from afar.” He smiled radiantly, and I nearly did a double-take at his sudden bout of confidence. “That said, I can’t accept a message that tries to seduce another person’s girlfriend, even as a joke. Shall I rip it up and throw it away?” He snatched the card out of my hand.

“I think that’s going a little too far,” I said, startled.

“I’m just kidding.” He chuckled and placed the card on the table.

No, I’m certain he was at least half serious.

“I didn’t take him seriously when we spoke in Fushimi, but to think he’d send such an earnest arrangement... I’ll have to be prepared,” he murmured quietly.

“Hm?”

“It’s nothing. Shall we have some more tea?” He smiled softly as if nothing had happened.

*

After tea, we went back to the window, reluctant to part with the view. The greenery was dazzling, and the scenery flowed into the distance as if it were being sucked away.

“This is the last part of our trip on the 7 Stars, huh?” I remarked.

“Yes, after taking a stroll through Kagoshima’s Sengan-en garden, all that’s left is returning to Hakata.”

“Right.” Our trip was almost over.

"This was an incredible vacation. When we get home, it'll be back to work at Daimaru Kyoto for me," he said with a refreshed face.

"Good luck."

"Thank you. Oh, right, Daimaru Kyoto is having a riddle-solving rally."

"Oh?"

"There will be quiz questions about Kyoto on every floor. You're welcome to participate."

"Sure! That sounds like a lot of fun." I smiled. "Your training will be over soon too, huh?"

"Yes, Daimaru Kyoto is my ninth job. After this, I'll finally become a real detective."

"Huh?" I looked up at him, surprised.

"I'm going to be helping at the Komatsu Detective Agency."

"You really are going to become Detective Holmes of Kyoto," I murmured, giggling.

"It's only temporary, though. After that, my training will be over."

"You've worked hard." *Holmes gave Komatsu's detective agency the honor of being his final training location.* The thought of him working with Komatsu in Gion as a detective made me smile.

"It might be a good idea to give Yoneyama the hanging scrolls at Komatsu Detective Agency too," he said.

"Yes, I definitely agree." I nodded firmly. Suddenly, I remembered something. "Oh, I wanted to ask you..." I looked up at the man standing beside me, my face serious.

"What is it?"

"What were you talking about with Shokado Garden Art Museum's assistant director?"

"Oh, that. Sorry, I forgot to tell you because my mind was preoccupied with Yoneyama's case and this trip. I'm thinking of turning the Yagashira residence

into an art museum.”

“Huh? Really?” I blinked in surprise.

“Yes. It won’t be anytime soon, but that’s the plan. I want to make the first floor an art museum with a cafe. The Yagashira family has works of art that have been passed down for generations, so we could display those and have a cafe on the side.”

The Yagashira exhibition room was already like a small museum. I imagined going down the Philosopher’s Walk, looking at works of art, and then taking a break at a cafe.

“That sounds great.”

“Thank you. Because of that, I’ve been learning relevant knowledge from a lot of people, including Assistant Director Igawa.”

“I see,” I said, moved.

“It might not be for a long time, but I was wondering if you’d be willing to help me.”

“Yes, of course. I’d love to.” I nodded firmly. *That Western-style stone estate is going to become a small museum and cafe.* “I can’t wait to be able to help you.” I clapped my hands together.

Holmes smiled cheerfully. “Thank you, Aoi.”

He touched my cheek and leaned closer. Our lips came together gently as the scenery around us passed by. Afterwards, we snuggled next to each other and went back to enjoying the view.

It was a journey I’d remember for the rest of my life.

Short Story: What Akihito Saw: A Perilous Night

That night, even though it was late, festivities were in the air at the Yagashira residence near the Philosopher's Walk.

"Oh, a taxi stopped in front of the house. It's probably Kiyo," announced Rikyu, who'd been sitting in front of the bay window like a watchman.

"Kiyotaka's back?! All right, everyone, take a party popper!" The owner eagerly handed out the contraptions.

"You're seriously overdoing this," Yoshie said with an exasperated shrug.

The manager, sitting on the sofa, forced a smile.

"Eh, it's fine," said Ueda. "It's a happy occasion." Like the owner, he was cheerfully holding a party popper.

"I don't want Kiyo to hate me, so I'm not doing it. What about you, Akihito?" Rikyu looked at me.

"A gun salute for Holmes? How could I not?" Naturally, I—Akihito Kajiwara—took a party popper without hesitation.

Hearing footsteps coming up the stairs, we gulped and trained our eyes on the brass doorknob. It turned slowly, and the door quietly opened.

"I've returned," announced Holmes.

The moment he appeared in the living room, we all set off our poppers at once. "Welcome back, and congratulations!"

I bet that gave him a surprise. Is he gonna go red-faced and yell at us?

I looked at him excitedly, but he seemed unfazed.

"If you want to use party poppers, that's your prerogative, but please clean up the confetti afterwards," he said nonchalantly. "Oh, and Yoshie, thank you for taking care of my duties while I was away." He bowed to the owner's girlfriend.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I had fun. Did you enjoy your trip?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, right, I heard that Aoi went to a department store’s cosmetics section to ask for advice. She must’ve been pretty, no?”

“Yes, my Aoi was very charming,” Holmes replied with a smile. It was as if he was completely ignoring us.

Wait, hold up. I wasn’t listening that carefully, but something feels off about what he just said.

Holmes then bowed to the manager and said, “Thank you for running the store while I was gone, dad.”

The manager smiled gently and shook his head. “It’s fine. I’m just glad you enjoyed your trip.”

“Rikyu must have helped too, didn’t he? I’m sorry for taking up your vacation.”

“Nah, I didn’t have anything else to do anyway.”

As usual, the boy was like a loyal dog when it came to Holmes.

The owner looked at his grandson, trembled, and exclaimed, “Now, wait just a minute, Kiyotaka! What’s with that boring reaction?! Stop throwing shade and give us something better!”

Whoa, it feels weird hearing the phrase “throwing shade” from an old man’s mouth.

“I won’t, because I expected this to happen,” Holmes retorted. “I really didn’t want to stop by here because of that, but I did so because I wanted to thank Yoshie and dad. Oh, yes, here are some souvenirs from Kyushu.” He opened his suitcase and laid out some boxes on the table.

“What about my thanks?” asked the owner.

“Did you help with the store or the house?”

“No, I didn’t do anything.”

“Then please be quiet.”

I couldn't help but laugh at how Holmes easily shut the owner down despite their personal hierarchy.

"Anyway, I certainly didn't expect you to come too, Akihito," he continued. "Surely you're too busy for this." He gave me an exasperated look.

"Oh, I happened to be in Osaka today for a radio program. You've heard of Akky Kajiwara ☆ *Midnight Cinderella Boy*, right? Well, that doesn't matter right now. How was your trip? Did it go well?" I asked, leaning forward.

He smiled gently and said, "I'll leave it to your imagination."

It was the usual line. I couldn't help but be awed by the suggestiveness and impact of his smile.

"What a stupid question," Rikyu muttered behind me. He was already eating the Hakata sweets that Holmes had brought with him. "You can tell from his relaxed demeanor and shiny skin. He even casually said, 'my Aoi.' And he definitely said it just because he wanted to. I bet he's going to keep saying it too."

"Anyway, I'll be going to my room," Holmes said, taking his suitcase, opening the living room door again, and stepping out.

Right, Holmes's room is at the end of the hallway. I stealthily followed him without hesitation. *The party poppers aren't the only trap we set.* I kept a distance so that he wouldn't notice me. *He looks so stylish walking down the long hallway with his suitcase.*

He stopped at the end of the hall, opened the door, and froze in place, leaving the door open.

Oh, he stopped moving.

I quickly hid behind a nearby pillar and spied on him. Holmes let go of his suitcase handle, quickly grabbed a wooden sword that was next to the door, and rushed forward, leaping and swinging the sword down at a figure in the darkness.

Bang!

Before I could even react, the shadowy figure laughed and said, "Scary as

ever, eh? You weren't gonna stop at the last second this time, were you?"

Wind blew in from the open window, making the curtains flutter. The room was engulfed in moonlight, revealing a grinning Ensho, who had caught the sword with both hands.

"There's no need to stop for a trespasser," Holmes replied with a smile.

"You offend me. I'm here because the homeowner let me in." Ensho shrugged.

"But this is my room," Holmes argued, lowering his sword. "I was prepared for my grandfather's harassment to some extent, but I didn't expect him to place *you* here. I assumed you were focusing on your own training." A cold smile appeared on his face.

Ensho gave an amused laugh. "This is why I can't stand Kyoto people. I'm here on Yanagihara's orders. I don't need you to tell me to do my training."

"Well then, do your best."

They smiled at each other.

Holy crap! Even though they're smiling, their conversation and auras are terrifying. A chill ran down my spine.

"Oh, right," Holmes continued, "thank you for going to the trouble of sending flowers to the 7 Stars for my Aoi's birthday. It was a beautiful arrangement. She loved it." Bathed in moonlight, he wore a brilliant smile that he almost never showed Ensho or me. It sent another chill down my spine.

"It sounds so forced when you say 'my Aoi.' You don't need to thank me when you weren't the least bit happy about it." Ensho snorted.

"That's not true. It really was a wonderful arrangement. I was once again impressed by your many talents. The flowers also smelled lovely. Thank you for adding that touch to our sweet moment together." Holmes held an index finger to his mouth and chuckled.

Oh god, this is really scary!

Every single one of Holmes's words alluded to his intimate time with Aoi. He was clearly provoking Ensho. It felt like sparks could fly at any moment.

Overwhelmed by what I was witnessing as I peeked through the door, I bent back and realized that Rikyu was right behind me.

Huh, Rikyu came too? Man, I'm really glad I have a comrade to share this inexplicable fear with.

Feeling relieved, I turned to the side and saw him with an ecstatic grin on his face and sparkling eyes.

Never mind. This guy isn't a comrade, I realized immediately. I focused my attention on the room again. Ensho seemed openly annoyed for once, just as Holmes had intended.

"I'm still indebted to you, Mr. Holmes, so I didn't really want to interfere with your trip," he began.

Holmes's expression didn't change.

"But I honestly do like Aoi, so I was thinking of making a real move on her once her trip with you was over."

What? Ensho likes Aoi? I can't believe it.

Holmes remained calm.

"You're not surprised?" Ensho asked.

"No, I could sense your feelings from that 'earnest' arrangement of yours," Holmes said nonchalantly.

Ensho smiled self-deprecatingly. "Of course you did. Well, what she did with you on your trip doesn't bother me. I don't care about a woman's purity, and considering how sneaky you are, it could be good to let you 'develop' her. But still, the 7 Stars?" He chuckled and grabbed Holmes's chin.

Rikyu and I were stunned by the act, but Holmes seemed unfazed. He continued to glare coldly at Ensho. It looked like he hadn't moved out of the way on purpose.

"You really are a nasty man," Ensho continued. "Do you know what it means to give a clueless child the highest quality things? When they eat the most delicious meat first, they won't eat cheap meat anymore. That's how you brainwashed her. It's like a curse that'll force her to stay with you." He gritted

his teeth as he spoke.

I could tell he was frustrated. *Man, that's a real surprise. Ensho is seriously into Aoi. He didn't interfere with their trip out of respect for Holmes's help, but he's not gonna go easy on them anymore. Why does he want Aoi so badly, though?*

Holmes chuckled, grabbed Ensho's wrist, and pulled it away from his face. "I was wondering what you'd say, but that's it? Isn't that how men are to begin with? We use our advantages and resort to whatever dirty tricks it takes to get the woman we want. It's to be expected." He smiled back, unfazed.

There was definitely something different about him today. Before, whenever these two clashed, it seemed like Holmes had been the one losing his composure, but now it was the opposite.

But jeez, just how much confidence did that guy get from going on a single trip with Aoi? My face stiffened.

Ensho clicked his tongue and yanked his wrist out of Holmes's grip. "You should propose to her, then." He laughed mockingly. "Since you liked her enough to brainwash her, you oughta take responsibility by proposing."

Man, he really knows how to say nasty things. There's no way Holmes could respond elegantly to that.

"I did," Holmes said casually.

"Huh?" Everyone froze.

"What? You seriously proposed?" Ensho asked, goggling in disbelief. For what it's worth, I felt the same way.

"Yes, I did." Holmes seemed slightly embarrassed. Or was he happy?

The area fell silent for a moment. Then, before I knew it, Rikyu and I had leaped out from behind the door and were clinging to Holmes.

"Did you really propose to Aoi, Holmes?!"

"Are you serious, Kiyo?"

"Aoi's still a student! Besides, just think about it! You might meet someone

better in the future!”

“He’s right, Kiyo! Don’t be hasty!”

Holmes gave us an exasperated look as we pestered him. “I’m aware that it isn’t possible right now. But there is no better woman for me than Aoi.”

Ensho, who had been dumbfounded, suddenly burst out laughing. “Ah, I’ve lost. I’ve really lost. Aoi was a rare hit with me, but I can’t propose to her. You must be getting carried away, eh?”

I totally understand! Except Aoi isn’t a hit with me, though.

“Carried away? Perish the thought. I’m a connoisseur, and a connoisseur doesn’t hesitate when he deems something good and wants to obtain it,” Holmes declared.

Ensho froze. “I see. How amusing. I’d expect no less from you, Mr. Holmes.”

“Thank you.”

Ugh, I really wish these guys would stop saying things like “how amusing” when they aren’t amused at all and they’re actually seething inside. It’s seriously scary.

“Now then, could you all leave the room?” Holmes asked. “I want to change.” He shooed us away and loosened his tie.

“Yeah, I’m out.” Ensho raised a hand and started walking towards the door. Then he stopped and turned around. “But if that proposal wasn’t for ‘right now,’ that means you asked her to marry you ‘someday,’ right?”

“Yes, and?”

“That’s basically the same as kids in a field of flowers promising to marry each other. Aoi might be pretty brainwashed by you, but this means I still have a chance—and time.” Ensho grinned and left the room.

That was totally a loser’s last-ditch effort. He’s just struggling in vain. I guess even Ensho is awkward when it comes to the girl he likes. But seriously, what’s so good about Aoi?

Anyway, that desperate jab isn’t gonna work on Holmes. The winner this time

is clear. I shrugged.

After standing still for a short while, Holmes suddenly took his phone out of his jacket pocket.

Hm? Who's he going to call? Rikyu and I exchanged looks.

"Oh, it's me," said Holmes. "Thank you for today. I'm sorry I only briefly greeted your parents since it was late." He seemed to be talking to Aoi. "I know this is sudden, but I was wondering if you would be all right with getting married while you're still in school. It'll be after my training is over, of course. There are many students out there who get married, so I don't think it'll be a problem. Oh, I don't need an answer right now. I just want you to consider it."

Rikyu and I gaped and looked at each other.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you. No, nothing's wrong, really. Yes, nothing happened. Okay, I did meet Ensho."

I burst out laughing at his last words. "I think Aoi might be the strongest one of all."

"I hate to admit it, but I kind of agree." Rikyu nodded, looking slightly displeased.

And so, Holmes is basking in happiness right now, but the future has a lot in store for him. He's still going to get caught up in incidents, and since he angered someone troublesome on his trip, that's going to get messy. But setting aside the future, for now I think I'll congratulate this baffling couple that none of us approve of. Aoi turned twenty and their relationship finally moved forward. And then there's the start of the love triangle with Ensho...

I turned around and gave Holmes a thumbs-up. "You did it, Holmes."

He grimaced and grabbed something. The next thing I knew, a cushion came flying at me and hit me clean in the face.

"What was that for? I was congratulating you."

"That face of yours ticked me off. I don't need your congratulations."

"What the hell, man?!" I whirled around and rushed to tackle him.

And so went the night Holmes of Kyoto returned from his trip.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

The *Holmes of Kyoto* series has reached volume ten. Since this was Kiyotaka and Aoi's first trip on their own, it inevitably became extremely sweet at times. I'm worried about whether it'll be okay. The sweetness has actually been toned down quite a bit from the first draft. I considered reducing it some more, but when I thought of Kiyotaka going on his long-awaited trip with Aoi, I really wanted to keep the sweet moments for his sake. Please prepare a bitter drink or similar to wash down the sugariness of this volume.

Also, when I finished writing this manuscript, the editor lamented, "It feels like it's the final installment. The readers will be sad." But worry not—*Holmes of Kyoto* isn't over yet. It will continue a little longer. I hope you'll stay with me for the future developments I have in mind.

Over the course of writing this series, there were several times I seriously regretted not making it a story where the characters never age. But at the same time, it's fun to watch over them as they grow up, and this volume was deeply moving because I never thought I'd be able to write about Kiyotaka and Aoi going on a trip by themselves.

As I wrote at the beginning of the book, the luxury overnight train "7 Stars" was modeled after JR Kyushu's "Seven Stars in Kyushu" and "Tenku no Shima" after "Tenku no Mori." They said, "When it's a fictional story, there will inevitably be some differences from reality which may cause misunderstandings with customers, so please change the names slightly when publishing them." As such, I really only changed them slightly. The lounge at Hakata Station is called "VENUS" in the book, but its real name is "Kinsei" (the planet's Japanese name). Although the names have been changed, I tried to depict the locations as accurately as possible. I hope the story will feel like a simulated journey on the extravagant overnight train that people call a "moving luxury hotel."

I was also able to obtain the cooperation of Daimaru Kyoto this time.

Someone from the sales promotion department has actually been a fan of the series since volume one, which is what led to this opportunity. I'm very happy. Thank you so much to Daimaru Kyoto's manager, assistant manager, and everyone from the sales promotion department.

This year, 2018, brings a lot of good news for *Holmes of Kyoto*. The manga version of the series, drawn by Ichiha Akizuki, released volume one in March and will be releasing volume two this month—July. The first two volumes of the manga cover the first volume of the novel; in other words, the second volume of the manga ends with “After the Festival,” the last chapter of the novel's first volume. The artist did a wonderful job depicting Aoi and Kiyotaka at the Gion Festival, so please check out that version as well.

Also in July, we have the start of the anime adaptation of *Holmes of Kyoto*! Aoi is voiced by Miyu Tomita and Kiyotaka is voiced by Kaito Ishikawa. I died hearing Tomita's cute voice as Aoi and Ishikawa's calm, sexy voice as Kiyotaka. Even now, it's sort of hard to believe that this series has finally gotten an anime. I believe it's a miracle that resulted from a lot of support coming together. Thank you.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks:

To Futabasha, EVERYSTAR, DEF STUDIOS, the proofreaders, the distributors, the cover designer, the illustrator Shizu Yamauchi, who once again graced us with wonderful frontispieces, Ichiha Akizuki, who draws the manga adaptation, the *Holmes of Kyoto* production committee and everyone involved with the anime, and you for picking up this book.

I'm truly thankful for all of the connections surrounding myself and this series.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki



Kiyotaka Yagashira and Aoi Mashiro
on the 7 Stars cruise train



Rikyu Takiyama at the Yagashira residence

Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 10 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! As usual, I'll be going over some miscellaneous trivia that wasn't explained in the book.

First, chapter 1 begins with Aoi and Kaori eating at Kyoto Prefectural University's Inamori Hall. This hall is named after Kazuo Inamori, who is known for founding Kyocera, a major electronics manufacturer headquartered in Kyoto.

Later in the chapter, when Aoi and Holmes are talking to the sisters whose mother passed away, Yuko says, "The forty-ninth day has passed, so things have settled down." In Japanese Buddhism, it is believed that after death, the soul goes through a series of judgments before being reborn. The process takes forty-nine days, and in the world of the living, the family will offer weekly prayers and the priest will hold a ceremony on the seventh and forty-ninth days. The seventh day represents the day the soul arrives at the Sanzu River (equivalent to the river Styx), so this ceremony is for praying that the deceased will be allowed to cross at the slow part of the river. The forty-ninth day is when the soul's destination has been determined. This ceremony is for praying that the deceased will attain nirvana, and after this, the bereaved family can return to their daily lives.

As for the acting roles their mother played, Kasuga no Tsubone was a very accomplished woman of the Edo period. After joining the reigning Tokugawa clan as a wet nurse, she established the women's quarters of Edo Castle and was appointed to the highest rank by the shogun's official wife. In that position, she essentially had as much influence as the shogun's council of elders.

The other role the mother played was advisor to Atsuhime, the widow of a Tokugawa shogun. During the fall of Edo Castle, Atsuhime played an important part in appealing to the enemy force's leader, Takamori Saigo, for a peaceful surrender so that the Tokugawa family could survive.

Lastly, as explained in the afterword, the cruise train Aoi and Holmes go on is

based on JR Kyushu's "Seven Stars in Kyushu." It's depicted accurately to the real thing, but what the book doesn't mention is the actual price of the tickets—their exact itinerary doesn't exist, but at the time of writing this (May 2022), a ballpark figure for that three-day trip in the most expensive suite would be around \$20,000 (a good chunk of which is for the luxury resort). Basically, Aoi and her mom are shocked for a good reason.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 10

by Mai Mochizuki

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